

SPY IN A BIKINI

"Lord Straven" rose from the beach in one smooth, athletic motion to start indoors for drinks. Suddenly his head was enveloped in something soft . . . and his face pressed against something even softer.

A gasp. That golden-haired woman pulled away from him in two little strips of a bikini, snatching at the gown and blushing furiously.

"My dear young lady—"

"Your dear young lady be damned!" she exploded.

Did she really suppose he had deliberately stuck his head under a strange woman's robe? Or did she think he was just some clumsy oaf? Or . . . did she know he was Nick Carter . . . and was she the most outrageously beautiful and brazen counter-spy that Killmaster had ever met?

THE NICK CARTER/KILLMASTER SERIES

A101 RUN, SPY, RUN

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A183 DANGER KEY

NICK

CARTER

A Killmaster Spy Chiller

A BULLET FOR FIDEL

AWARD BOOKS

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Dedicated to
The Men of the Secret Services
of the
United States of America

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THE MOVING FINGER WRITES

It bobbed aimlessly in the deep blue waters a little more than two miles from the Key, a nameless fishing boat with nothing on its decks but blood and sunlight and the body of a bearded man.

The loudspeaker summons grated stridently across the sunlit calmness and brought nothing in return.

Lieutenant Hansard of the Coast Guard cutter *Intrepid* put aside the megaphone. "Jackson, I'll want you and Dean. If he can't hear that he's stone deaf, dead drunk, or just plain dead. Let's go."

Within minutes the bearded man had company. His previous guests had left perhaps an hour before.

No name, Hansard noted. Number painted out. New paint. Old boat. Smell of fish. And something else.

The silent fishing boat listed slightly as they climbed aboard.

"Jesus God Awmighty!" Dean sucked in his breath and stared down at the deck.

"Keep back," Hansard commanded sharply. "Jackson, you take a look below. Don't touch anything unless you absolutely have to. Make sure there's no one else around—and if there is, you be sure to see him first! Dean. Stay where you are and keep your eyes open. I don't want you putting your feet into this."

The boat was a shambles. Everything breakable was broken, including the body of the big bearded man. He had fought savagely; fought and lost and died. The acrid odor mingling with the smell of sea and fish came from the ~~smells and~~ splashes and pools of blood that stained the ~~deck~~.

Hansard stepped forward gingerly. It would be a ~~miracle~~ if this man were still alive. There was no ~~man~~ ~~body~~.

death was heavy in the air. But he made himself lean over and touch the bloodied shape.

Whoever the man was, he had been stabbed repeatedly and without finesse. There were wounds in the gut and the back and the head, Hansard noted as he choked back a wave of nausea, and the man had felt the agony of them before he died. The bearded face, itself encrusted with blood, was a tortured mask of pain. Even the outstretched hand, particularly the forefinger, seemed to have been dipped in blood.

Hansard stared. It *had* been dipped in blood. Deliberately, as if it had been a penpoint dunked into an inkwell. So maybe it had written something.

Well. That was not his business. That was for the Marine Inspection Office to discover. Or Coast Guard Intelligence. There was nothing for him to do but make sure that the man was past helping, and then radio for instructions.

Gently, very carefully, Hansard moved the sprawling limbs and placed his hand against the silent heart. He was not surprised that it was silent. But his careful movement had shown him two things that he found very interesting. One was on the outflung, short-sleeved arm of the murdered man. The other was a smeared and bloody tracing on the deck, still half-hidden by the body.

"No one below, sir." Jackson was back on deck, picking his way lightly through the shambles. "But everything's a mess. Upside down, like it's been searched. Say—what's that?"

Dean bent his huge body forward without moving from his position at the rail.

"Looks like writing," he rumbled. "See that, Lieutenant? Like with his finger he could of wrote it. S—something."

"I see it," said Hansard quietly. "Here, Jackson. Give me a hand. Careful, now. Dean, keep those big feet of yours where they are. There may be prints around, and we don't want to scuff them up. Easy, boy. That's it."

Now they could all see what Hansard had glimpsed.

On the deck, traced out with a bloody finger, were the ragged letters S-T-A-R. And on the man's outflung right forearm was a tiny, blue tattoo in the shape of an axe.

"Star," Hansard repeated thoughtfully. "His killer, maybe. The name mean anything to either of you?"

Dean rumbled a negative. Jackson shook his head. "No.

But he obviously meant it as some kind of clue. The tattoo, though. . . ."

"Yeah, the tattoo." Hansard nodded, the memory of a legend or a rumor stirring in his mind. "How's with the motor, Jackson?"

"Dead. Dead as he is."

"Uh-huh. Okay, you two stay aboard until further orders. I'm going to radio."

It was going to be some radio message. A dead boat, a dead man, a "Star" in blood, and a tattooed axe. I would not be at all surprised, Hansard thought as he swung back aboard the cutter, if this were the man we were looking out for. Only he wasn't supposed to be dead.

"I hope," said Hawk, chewing at the end of his evil-smelling cigar, "that your visit to London was sufficiently fruitful to justify the length of your stay."

"Oh, it was, indeed it was," Nick Carter said earnestly. And it certainly had been. The wonderful hours with his lovely Robyn were sufficient justification for any trip. Hawk, of course, would not agree. and therefore there was no point in telling him what his top agent did with his spare time.

The two men faced each other across Hawk's desk in the Washington offices of the Amalgamated Press and Wire Service. A casual onlooker would have assumed at once that Hawk was a typical news editor and that Carter was his prize reporter. In a way, the onlooker would have been right. Hawk and Carter *did* gather news. But they did not report it to the world at large. They gathered it through secret sources, culled it, analyzed it, shared it only with top governmental agencies, acted upon it, changed it, and often made news of their own that never reached the press.

The head of AXE, America's super-secret intelligence agency, looked across at the tall, steely-eyed man whose fellow agents called him Killmaster.

"Well?" Hawk said, and waited.

"Well," said Nick. "I should have thought you'd have noticed the cultured purity of my accent, the neat unobtrusiveness of my Savile Row suit, the package of fine cigars that I have placed on your desk in a vain attempt to lure you away from the frightful weeds you persist in smoking. But never mind; I am used to being unappreciated. Perhaps you would be more interested to learn that the Upmann

firm alone produces more than 100,000 cigars per day? That Churchill himself smoked nothing but their six and a half inch special? That Britain buys 150,000 cigars per month from one Cuban firm alone? That the tobacco growing area of the island is at the opposite end from where we want to go? And that the Straven and Hansbury Tobacco Company of London has proved to be so cooperative that I am now practically their adopted son? So cooperative, in fact, that I am the new Lord Straven. The old one has been good enough to lend me his London offices, his country home, his staff, his friends, his car, his accent, his tailor, and his general air of elegance. Hence the new Carter. Refined, suave, debonair—"

"And long-winded. I tried those cigars of yours. I don't like 'em." Hawk puffed energetically. "And you can save your Oxford accent, Carter, until you're on the job. Which will start as soon as you leave this office. Now. I take it you're satisfied with your cover?"

The steel-gray eyes lost their glint of humor and the handsome face hardened. Nick nodded.

"As sure as I can be without having grown up with the firm. They'll back me to the hilt—thanks to Tommy Hansbury. We fought a war together; I know him. No, of course I didn't tell him what we're up to." He caught the question in Hawk's eyes and answered it. "He still thinks I'm a private eye, and that was enough for him." This was not quite true. Tommy Hansbury owed a wartime debt to Carter, and *that* was enough for him. But there was no need for Hawk to know about his harrowing tunnel escape from Von Kramm's mountain hideout with Tommy half dead on his back. "If you want to get the British involved on a higher level, that's up to you. But as far as Hansbury's concerned, there'll be no questions."

"Right." There was no change in Hawk's expression; his face seldom did his talking for him. Only the men who knew him best—and Nick was one of them—could read his hard eyes and catch the slightly varying inflections of his voice. "Now. When I first sent for you from Saigon it was because I wanted you to be the man to go into Cuba. Unfortunately there were . . . certain pressures from various quarters, so that I was obliged to send a man in right away. With, I might add, insufficient preparation. Which I abhor. When I asked you to devise a means of getting into Cuba, I

was hoping that I would not have to send you." He paused. Blue smoke drifted toward the ceiling.

"What went wrong?" Nick asked quietly.

The old man almost sighed. "Agent Trainor. It was a bad cover. Returning refugee, with no way of communicating with us. How could he have? Returning Cubans don't go back with shortwave radios in their luggage. He was to come back the way he went, by small craft that he was to pick up in Miami. Since there was so little time to prepare I let him play it his way, alone and without any identification. Either of himself, or of his craft. And I'm afraid he played it badly. We know nothing of what he succeeded in finding out. From the time that he left I've had the Navy and Coast Guard on special alert for small craft. P-3 has been waiting in Key West, as arranged, in case he managed to get word through."

"And?"

"No word. The Coast Guard picked him up yesterday morning. Dead on his boat, lying in a pool of blood. P-3 joined up with Coast Guard Intelligence and literally took the boat apart. Nothing. Nothing but one word. Before he died he managed to write one word in his own blood. The word was 'Star.' I have no idea what it could mean. You're going to have to find out."

"'Star,'" Nick repeated thoughtfully. "Not one of our code words. Where was he picked up, if it makes any difference?"

"It makes no difference now," Hawk said between his teeth. "Two miles off Key West. That close. He may have drifted part of the way. But still . . . in broad daylight, that close to home. Well. They got him. Better not let them get you too, Carter. I don't want to lose another man. At least not before I find out what's going on in those mountains."

"Your concern for my safety touches me deeply," Nick murmured, knowing that Hawk felt Trainor's loss more profoundly than he would ever admit. "But what do you think is going on in the mountains? Another band of revolutionaries getting ready to swoop down on Fidel? Or do we suspect a missile base?"

Hawk gave him a hard look and opened the file that lay on his desk. It was marked, Nick saw, *Trainor—Condition Red—Cuba*.

"What I think doesn't matter. What you find out does. Now. First of all, here is a map of Cuba. ~~Mark~~ *Mark* the area indicated in the southeastern section." Nick took the

map, groaning inwardly. His respect for Hawk was enormous, but he could do without the lecture-room manner. He studied the map obediently.

"Oriente Province. Sierra Maestras. Duly noted."

"Right. Now. I have here a set of eight photographs. The first four—these—were all taken more than a month ago. The second batch have all been taken during the last month. All eight photographs are of the same general area. Height and angle vary slightly, but you will see that all are enlargements of the area designated grid seven point four. We can pinpoint this place to within a fraction of a mile—even to yards. But we don't know what's there. These of course are Air Rec pictures. There's something about 'em we don't like. Last time we looked, there was nothing out of the way. There's still nothing. But it's a different sort of nothing. I might tell you, while you're looking at them, that they came from the Chief of Naval Intelligence with a request for our assistance. It seems he didn't feel right about asking our boys at Guantanamo to conduct their own investigation, close though they are to the suspect area." Hawk's tone was dry. "Subsequent to the first query—a bare two hours later, in fact—the request from ONI became an order from the top. Immediate action. Thus, Trainor into Cuba, and you preparing on the sidelines."

Nick nodded, feeling something like a second-string quarterback, and studied the pictures.

The first four looked like dozens of other long-range reconnaissance photographs of the Sierra Maestra range. Nick had studied plenty of them in his time, as part of his homework for AXE, and what he saw now was a familiar pattern of trees and rock. He spread out the second batch.

At first glance they looked exactly the same.

Nick frowned.

"Here," said Hawk. "Try this."

Nick took the proffered magnifying glass and scrutinized the photographs one by one.

"There are others," said Hawk. "You can see them all before you leave. But these are representative. Notice anything?"

"Um. But I can't quite put my finger on it."

"No. Neither could the Navy. But there is a difference, something that only their very latest lenses and most sensitive infra-red film could begin to detect. And I mean 'begin.' We don't have very much to go on."

"Shadows," said Nick thoughtfully. The second batch of pictures *was* different, so very subtly different that even a point by point comparison revealed no definitive discrepancies. "It seems to be a matter of perspective. Or is it dimension? Could it have something to do with the time of day, or season, or weather conditions?"

Hawk shook his head emphatically. "There again, I can show you other pictures to match against these. Don't forget, we've been conducting surveillance flights throughout the seasons for a good long time, and we know what those mountains look like under virtually every condition except of course thick fog or haze. Neither of which we have here. Season, day, time, weather condition of these shots match perfectly the condition of—these." He flicked three more photographs from the folder and slid them across to Nick. "You'll have a chance to see them on the screen in a while. At the moment I simply want to familiarize you with the problem and get your preliminary thoughts."

"Shadows," Nick said again, still scrutinizing the pictures. "There seems to be a difference somehow in the . . . in the depth. Everything's in the right place; everything seems to be the right size and shape. But in this section there appears to be a kind of flattening out—as if the trees here are one-dimensional."

"Ah. You see it, then. Good. Now, let's plot out a course for you before we go into the screening room. A crew of COMSEC men—experts on Cuban terrain and surveillance photography and so on—will be meeting us there in forty-five minutes. Right now I want you to look at the file on Trainor."

Nick looked. It was pitifully brief. David Trainor had been the son of a Cuban mother and an American father. Big, bearded, and heavily tanned, he had decided to go to Cuba via small craft in the guise of a disillusioned Cuban refugee returning to the land he was sorry he had ever abandoned. He had chosen the name of José Manuel Cabrera and had gone on his way armed with nothing but false papers, some pesos and dollars, his excellent command of Cuban Spanish, a gun and a knife. When last seen alive by AXE agent P-3, on a dark night two weeks before, he had been nosing his small boat out into the open sea beyond the Florida Keys. His intention had been to land at a fishing village near

Havana and make his way cross-country to "relatives" in Santiago.

It could have worked. Trainor was a good man, at his best when working alone. All Axemen were used to operating on their own. But Trainor had been too much on his own on the Cuban mission.

"I suppose he *did* get there?" Nick raised a querying eyebrow. "'Star' could've been the name of a boat that intercepted him on the way."

Hawk re-lit his dead cigar. "It's possible. We're checking registrations. But maybe he didn't get there. We don't even know that. Now. About your cover. You're right, of course, about the tobacco-growing region being rather far from where you want to go. However, as a British businessman—and don't forget you chose your cover yourself—I think you'll find you have considerable freedom of movement all over the island. And you'll be able to take in a certain amount of equipment that was not available to Trainor. For instance. . . ."

When Nick Carter left Hawk's Washington office some hours later for his own apartment in New York, his mind was full of knowledge crammed into it by various experts from Combined Security and his overnight case was bulging with maps and equipment supplied by special departments of AXE. He knew that his orders to find out what was going on in the Sierra Maestra came from the very highest branch of the United States Government. And he felt in his bones that somewhere along the line he would run into a vicious killer.

But all that he had to go on was a strange shallowness in an aerial photograph . . . and the word "Star" written in a dead man's blood.

STRANGERS ON A PLANE

One moment she was walking down the airplane aisle toward him and the next moment she was in his arms. It was as simple as that. Or almost.

Nothing like it had happened on the well-ordered BOAC flight from London to Madrid. But maybe they did things differently on CUBANA. On the other hand, it wasn't really anybody's fault.

There they were, turbo-jetting quite peacefully through the night sky toward Havana, some of them sleeping, some of them reading, quite a few of them chattering cheerfully, when the girl got up from her seat near the front and started making her way down the aisle. Instinct made Nick look up from his book, that heaven-sent instinct that acted like a geiger counter whenever danger or a pretty girl was near. But "pretty" was not the word for this one. She was a knock-out, a golden-haired curvaceous armful of fresh young womanhood.

Nick pushed aside the steaming coffee brought to him moments before by the stewardess—a merry-eyed brunette whose name, he had soon found out, was Juana—and put his book down beside it. The blonde deserved his undivided attention. Lords of the nobility, he told himself, had as much right to be lecherous as anyone else.

He watched the gracefully wagging hips with pleased approval. Nice. Just enough roundness and just enough waggle, nothing obvious. Subtle. Natural. Dainty high heels, neat ankles, exquisitely curved calves. Gliding thighs. The waggle again. Flat, trim belly—girdle? None of your business, Carter. Still, it would be interesting to know. Slim waist, two delicious mounds of firm femininity bobbing just barely perceptibly. . . .

And then it happened, whatever it was that happened. Maybe there was a spot of turbulence and maybe the plane lurched slightly. He didn't feel it, but he was inured to the occasional discomforts of air travel so it could have been that. Anyway, one moment she was a foot or two away from him down the aisle and the next moment she had lurched against him and one arm was clutched around his neck. The other slammed down on the tray and sent his coffee cup flying.

"Garl!" he yelled inelegantly. Hot coffee dripped down his shirtfront. The flimsy tray ground into what he politely called his lap and her full weight came down on top of it. He clutched at her reflexively, feeling the soft firmness of her bosom against his coffee-sodden chest and scenting the fragrance of her yellow-gold hair. She leapt back like a startled

cat and slammed her head against the back of the seat in front of him.

"I say," he said anxiously, watching the glazed look creep across her face. "Are you all right?"

The blonde shook her head like a puppy emerging from a wave.

"All right!" she wailed. "Am I all right! Look what I've *done* to you! I'm so terribly sorry. I don't know what to say. I just don't know what happened." Her slender hands made feeble little brushing motions against his chest. "I'm—I'm humiliated. Are you burned? Are you hurt? You must let me help to clean it off. Oh, I *am* so sorry! I feel so terrible—well why don't you say something!" The last came out in a rush of angry words, and suddenly she was back in the aisle staring down at him so accusingly that for one wild moment he felt that he must have stuck out his foot and tripped her up. Then he saw the suspicious brightness of her eyes.

"I was trying to," he said mildly, "but you didn't give me a chance." He disengaged himself from the broken tray and uncoiled his tall length from the seat. "Look. Believe me. It was a glorious moment, and I feel nothing but gratitude and a little damp under the collar. It's not every day I have lovely ladies landing in my lap." Actually, it was a poor day when one didn't, but to have admitted that would have been ungallant. "Now suppose we order some fresh coffee and have it together, and we'll forgive each other."

She looked up at him, and he saw that her eyes were very big and very blue.

"That's very kind of you," she said stiffly. "You're most understanding. But if you don't mind, I won't have coffee with you. I'd rather just go sit in my corner and curse myself. Please, though—let me do something about your suit. I feel so bad, I—"

"Forget the suit," said Nick, putting his hands on her shoulders. "I'll exact my price, and then we'll call it quits." He smiled down at her and bent his head.

"You'll—what?" she said faintly.

He kissed her. Her lips were soft and tasted like strawberries.

"There," he said. "We're even."

She drew back sharply. For a moment he thought she was going to slap him. Then she smiled.

"Bravo!" There was a ripple of laughter, and the clapping began. Somebody cheered loudly.

And that was all that happened.

One might have thought that Nick Carter, alias Lord Straven, would have spent the rest of the flight chatting away or being otherwise entertaining to his new blond, curvaceous, blue-eyed friend. But he didn't. There was a little flurry of activity, and Juana came dashing up to do her duty as an efficient stewardess, and then—nothing. The flight spent some time behind a door at the rear of the plane and then returned to her seat, sparing a cool smile for Nick as she passed. Carter himself accepted Juana's ministrations, ordered fresh coffee, and went back to his book.

But as Flight 207 from Madrid to Havana draped on through the night, he wondered. He looked at the carpeting between the rows of seats and saw no flaw that could have caught a lady's heel and caused her to fly, somewhat clumsily—to say the least—into a gentleman's arms. Nor could he recall the slightest bump in the smooth flow of their flight that might have made her lose her balance. Could she have left something on his seat? on his person? on the floor near him? He checked discreetly. She had not. He even went to the lavatory she had recently occupied and looked around for he knew not what. Again, nothing.

By the time the Britannia's wheels rolled smoothly to a stop in the early morning light of Havana, he had learned that the blonde's name was Alison O'Reilly and that she was traveling on a British passport. Which made him wonder why a faint nuance in her accent didn't fit her name, and why she should have chosen him—of all people—to land upon. Well, accidents did happen. But usually when they happened to spies they weren't accidents.

He saw her again when they went through Customs. Tommy Hansbury had wanted to have someone meet him at the airport, someone from one of the cigar companies or even from the Government to give his arrival a little bit of publicity, but Nick had talked him down. He preferred to make his first impressions for himself.

His first sharp impression of Cuba was the heat of the atmosphere. His second was an annoying sensation in his right foot. This was accompanied by a despairing voice that said—"Oh, my God!" and a most appropriate smile on the face of the man who was

His own voice made a little sound of surprise and pain.

A small hand snatched the heavy bag from his foot even as he looked at it. His gaze traveled upward. Alison O'Reilly.

"I dropped it," she croaked. "Your foot just happened to be there. . . ."

"So I noticed," he said, feeling the pangs of life struggling through his foot. "What do you have in there, gold bars?" It was unoriginal, but the best he could do with the sweat breaking out on his forehead.

The Customs officer chuckled. "No, Señor. I have looked through it, and there is not a gold bar in the lot. But it is heavy, no?"

"Yes. Perhaps if I helped you, Miss O'Reilly—"

"Hal" Her blue eyes snapped angrily. "So you've been asking who I am. No, thank you. I'll manage for myself. And if you want your usual payment, *here*." She swung the heavy bag back with a crash that nearly buckled the Customs counter and planted a kiss somewhere in the air beneath Nick's chin.

"Now, look—" But she was gone, hefting the bag through the crowd and jutting her elfin chin angrily into the air.

"Women! You are okay, Señor. You go. Perhaps if you hurry you catch up with her." The Customs man was having a ball. Clearly his capacity for laughter had not suffered under Castro.

"Thanks, but I'll feel safer if she has a head start." Nick snapped shut his bags and thought some interesting thoughts. Customs was still chortling to itself but had turned its attention to the couple next in line after Nick. What had begun as a thorough inspection had ended in a chuckle and a quick chalk-marking of the temporary Lord Straven's luggage, which was carefully constructed to conceal certain material that any inspector would have been likely to find highly controversial. It was almost as if she had been his accomplice. A small diversion, a gay little laugh all round, and a lightening of the atmosphere that could have made all the difference between an uncomfortably intensive search and the plain sailing that now seemed to be his luck.

Nick found a porter and a cab. So far, everything was fine. Immigration had given him no trouble. G-2 had had no questions for him. Customs was a breeze. His foot was a little bruised, that was all.

Alison O'Reilly. Hmm. So now they had met twice, both

times under awkward circumstances. Nick stared out of the cab window at the bright blue morning and thought about her again. She hadn't planted anything on him; she hadn't taken anything from him. If she'd been trying to create opportunities to meet him she'd certainly succeeded, but she'd made no attempt to capitalize on them. What had she done? Nothing but drop things on him and get close to him. Perhaps her plan was to wear him down slowly, bruising a little bit here, chipping off a little bit there.

He grinned to himself at the memory of her beautiful, harassed face. Whoever and whatever she was, he would like to see her again, some time when she was walking with low heels on a steady surface and carrying nothing heavier than a handkerchief, and when he was upright, alert, and some yards away from the nearest movable object.

The Hotel Nacional de Cuba was no longer quite as luxurious as he remembered it from the old days, but it was still the finest in town and its cheerful, slightly worn luxury suited him perfectly.

He checked in, changed, ate an enormous breakfast, and went about his official business. It would be a couple of days at least, he figured, before he had established himself enough to be allowed to travel around with absolute freedom.

And travel he would have to. First from Havana to Santiago, which should be easy enough, and then up into the mountains Castro had used as a springboard for the revolution. That would not be so easy.

He spent the day making appointments and learning more about Cuban cigar manufacture than he cared to know. When he got back to the hotel there was a cabled message waiting for him. Hawk had routed it through London and order to read like tobacco dealers' talk, but what it really said was: *Have established beyond doubt that Trainor was on this trip. Further, there is no boat of the name mentioned here in any available records although possibility of a foreign Cuban vessel cannot be disregarded. Give each copy a mountain resort Triple A Priority.*

Fine. Dandy. He'd love to. But there was still much to be concluded, government officials to persuade, the English charm, and the haunting problem of "that" to be wrestled with and somehow solved. And then, when he had established that Trainor was on his way back when he was so forcibly stopped? Nick clucked ~~himself~~ ~~as he~~ ~~was~~

match to the cable and flushed the black fragments down the drain in his living-room sized bathroom. It would help to know if someone had actually seen Trainor in Cuba, or near Cuba, or heading for the Keys of home. There was still no way of knowing whether Trainor's one-word farewell message related to Havana, to Santiago, to the mountains, or what had happened on the boat.

He lit a Players and paced the huge suite allotted to him by the management on the strength of his apparent wealth and title, and reviewed the various maps and charts he had consigned to memory. "Star" could be the abbreviation or translation of a place name. It could be the shape of a mountain or a valley or a lake. It could be the name of an organization, like AXE or CLAW or SIN. It could be an emblem, an identifying mark, a symbol like the tiny tattoo worn by all AXEmen, or even a celestial body. It could be—the hell with it.

Nick stubbed out his cigarette. This was getting him nowhere. The thing to do was talk to people, listen to them, encourage them to talk about Castro's mountains, and then get there as soon as possible. In the meantime he would go downstairs and have a swim. Maybe the hotel had a star-shaped pool. . . .

It wasn't star-shaped. But the pool was beautiful, and the late afternoon sun on the tanned and shapely bodies that shared it with him was a lovely sight to see. He feasted his eyes until he felt the lids becoming heavy, after his sleepless night, with the languorous warmth of the Cuban afternoon, and then he turned over and gave his back to the sun.

Star and shadows. Maps and stars. A star. A star on a map? What map? What star? A mark that Trainor himself had made, perhaps. But there had been no papers of any kind with Trainor when his body had been found. No. It wouldn't have been that. It must be something that Trainor had seen or heard, not a mark that he himself had made.

Useless. Save it for the mountains, Carter.

He drowsed. But one part of his mind remained awake, that little corner responsible for reminding him that he was not a British tobacco importer but a spy.

The footsteps came closer and stopped close to his head.

"Lord Straven? Forgive the intrusion, but you will permit me, sir?"

His slitted eyes saw shiny boots and the narrow cuffs of

bright red trousers. He raised his head. A magnificent young man in glorious hotel uniform stood before him, holding a message on a tray.

"What is it?"

The tray came down to eye level. "Personal message from Señor Vaquero to Lord Straven, sir. You were not in your room, so we took the liberty—"

"No liberty. Thank you." Nick took the note. Vaquero was one of the big wheels in National Tobacco Enterprises and, as such, a sort of unofficial government official. The note apologized for the shortness of its notice and requested Lord Straven's company for dinner at the Vaquero home. "Reply verbally to bearer," it concluded.

"My respects to Señor Vaquero," Nick said. "I will thank him and say that Lord Straven would be delighted to accept." Good Lord, how stuffy he sounded. For the Stravens, he told himself, are said to be rather contemptuous of our importance.

"Sir!" The message-bearer snapped into a salute and seemed to have a touch of mockery about it and moved away with military crispness.

Nick slid his watch back over his wrist and noted the time. He'd had enough of the sun and the good-byes now. A quick shower, a couple of drinks and a walk in the park to go. He got to his feet in one smooth motion and suddenly everything went black.

He felt no pain, just a soft and steady pressure against his head and a stinging sensation against his face and upper body. And he was breathing in a little gasping sound from the back of his throat.

"Don't tell me," he said weakly, his voice muffled beneath the thick and cold blanket of the dark blue robe. "Could it possibly be—?"

It could be, and it was. The dark blue robe was there in two little seconds and he was standing in the dark blue robe and looking at the woman.

"You!" she said.

"Well, it wasn't my fault. I was wrong of me. I was standing there and that's all."

"That's very funny," she snapped icily. "How was I supposed to know that you were going to get up just that very minute? All I was doing was trying to put on my robe, just swinging it out a little bit as I always do, and then all of a sudden you leap up like a maniac and stick your head under it—"

"I stuck my head under it! My dear young lady—!"

"Your dear young lady be damned!" She was furious, and she was beautiful. Her golden-blond hair was deliciously tousled and her golden-brown body was quivering all over. It was wonderful to see. Nick admired every inch of her. "And you can stop that staring. I've had enough of you, Lord—ha!—Lord Straven! If you're a sample of an English lord, I hope they nationalize the lot of you and you'd better not damn well get in my way any more, you clumsy oaf!"

She swung into the robe and flounced away, leaving him staring. It seemed to him that she stumbled slightly on the grass, but there wasn't anything she could possibly have stumbled over so it was probably just rage that had made her a little unsteady on her feet. Nick shook his head disbelievingly. She drank, maybe? But no. She was stone cold sober and hopping mad. Strange girl. He picked up his towel and followed her into the hotel, leaving himself what he hoped would be a margin of safety.

Fortunately she was well ahead of him. When he reached the elevator she was gone.

Encounter number three. Just as awkward as the first two and still no effort on her part to further their acquaintance.

He was almost mumbling to himself by the time he got under the shower. There *must* be a reason why she kept bumping into him. There *had* to be a reason why she had turned up at the same hotel. But what in hell was that beautiful blonde bitch getting at? Before very much more time passed he was going to have to find out where this crazy girl had come from, why she had come, and what she was up to.

The cold water stung his chest. He thought about her. Again. She was a nut, all right. Maybe she had some weird ulterior motive. Maybe she was one of Tommy Hansbury's jokes? No, how could he! But she was a honey! Crazy honey, maybe the cutest, nuttiest, counterspy he had ever met, but—gorgeous.

He heard himself singing under the shower. Every once

in a while he stopped and muttered—What a nut. But beautiful!

Señor Vaquero's dinner party was a resounding success.

Nick had gone there half-expecting stiff formality, official courtesy, maybe a little brainwashing and propaganda. Instead he found friends, warm people who loved life and wanted him to love their Cuba with them. When he left them he was hoping desperately that whatever he found out about "Star" and the shadows in the Sierra Maestra would not cause further desperate tensions between his native land and theirs. Perhaps if they had known he was an American they would have acted differently. But somehow he knew that he had met genuine people who were being their real and wonderful selves.

He slid his room key into its keyhole and pushed open the main door of his suite. The short hairs at the nape of his neck suddenly stood out like cactus spines. There was a light on in the big living room at the end of the entrance hall, and he knew he hadn't turned it on. That was all right; there was nothing to stop the hotel staff from coming and going as they pleased. But whoever had come in hadn't left, and he didn't need his fabled sixth sense to tell him that. The radio was on, too, and someone was humming.

The door closed very quietly behind him. He glided like a lanky shadow down the hall toward the light, ready to draw his Luger at split-second notice but not really thinking he would have to.

He saw her before she saw him. She was dressed in a shimmering, low-cut evening gown and she was curled up in a chair he had already decided was the most comfortable in the room. The radio was making pleasantly rhythmic sounds and she was adding to them in a voice that was blue velvet with a ragtime beat. She had also, he noticed at once, delved into his liquor cabinet and provided herself with refreshment, for there was a bottle and an ice bucket on a tray beside her and she was taking periodic sips from the tall glass she was using as a baton.

"Now I *know* you drink," he said, and walked into the room.

She started a little, but not much.

"So!" she said. "Lord Straven has returned. Have a nice evening?"

"Very pleasant, thank you." He surveyed her critically.

Still gorgeous. And not lushing it up with that bottle. Just having a little ladylike refreshment. "And to what do I owe the pleasure of your company?"

"To your wealth, to your good looks and charm, and to your title," she said sweetly. "Lord Straven." She looked him in the eye and made her lip curl. "Lord Straven! Ha, ha, ha, *hal*"

LORD NICK AND LADY LARCENY

Nick felt a little chill crawl down his spine. He put ice cubes in a glass and poured himself a drink.

"Why do you laugh, Miss O'Reilly? In that somewhat uncouth way? I'm delighted, of course, that you are more cheerful than I have seen you before. It's nice to know that you feel at home here, and content." He sat himself down in the second most comfortable chair and had a little bracer before continuing. Lord Straven, ha ha ha. An unsettling girl, this one. It was just as well she had decided to show her hand so early in the game. *If* that was what she was doing. "And I, too, am amused at your presence here. But I'm not sure I get the whole point of the joke. Kindly explain."

"It's very simple," she said. "Things are going to be different from now on." She had a rather large evening purse, he noticed. It was open, and her left hand hovered near it.

"Are they indeed? I must say I'm relieved to hear it. So far they look to me very much the same as usual. You've been popping up unexpectedly all over the place, and now you've done it again. This time in my private suite. Would you mind telling me how you got in? I suppose you accidentally stumbled against the lock and the door flew open."

She glowered at him. "Still trying to be funny, hah? No, friend Straven, it was a whole lot easier than that. I asked a nice little hall porter to let me in. I said I was your popsie and he was so warm and sympathetic—"

Nick blinked. "You said you were my *what?*"

"Popsie. You heard me. Or perhaps you didn't know that English lords have popsies?"

"It had come to my attention. But one doesn't talk about them in quite those terms. And why should you claim to be my—uh—popsie?"

"Because I wanted to have a little private talk with you," she said reasonably. "And so that I could have a look around before you got back." She said it in the calm tones of a housewife who had wanted to make sure that the maid had dusted.

Nick eyed her steadily. She certainly was direct, for someone who was admittedly spying on him. And she was, without a doubt, a most attractive dish. A pity, because if she had been sent to spoil his game he was going to have to spoil hers first. But she had a most extraordinary approach.

"I suppose I should be outraged," he said easily. "But I don't carry the family jewels with me and, as you've no doubt discovered, I keep my money in travelers' checks. So you didn't get what you came for, did you?"

"I got it before I came," she said, just as calmly. "Of course, I would have enjoyed finding some proof, but I don't think it's really necessary. And I think we'll manage to understand each other without it."

"Do you? I don't understand you at all." It was his most honest statement of the day. "Look." He got to his feet. "There are two things I can do. One, call the management, who'll call the police. Two, put you over my knee and give you the spanking you deserve. You're going to stop this nonsense and tell me at once what you think you're doing here." He took a couple of long, purposeful strides that brought him close to her chair.

Something twinkled in her hand.

"Stay where you are!" Her small hand held an even smaller gun, and it was pointing steadily at him. "You wouldn't dare call the police, and you're not going to lay a hand on me."

He stopped in his tracks. Now here was an interesting development. He could probably wrest the thing from her without the slightest difficulty, but it might just go off accidentally and make a nasty little mess. On the whole it would be better if he were to bide his time.

"So you even came armed," he murmured. "But you ~~can't~~

use it, you know. The sympathetic hall porter knows you're here, remember."

"I remember," she said gently. "But that won't matter once I'm gone, will it? And you don't know who else I might have let in, do you?"

That was quite true; he didn't. His eyes darted to the bedroom door. It was slightly ajar. And there were plenty of other doors outside his line of vision.

She laughed. "Got you there, didn't I? Don't worry, Straven. We're alone together, Straven. I told you I wanted a *private* talk, didn't I, Straven?"

He sighed. There she was again, tossing the name of Straven at him like a spitball. Her insistence had a significance that meant he was going to have to break her pretty little neck.

"All right, then. Talk."

"Sit down."

There seemed no point in arguing—yet. He sat.

"That's a nice Straven," she said with satisfaction. "And don't get the idea that you can pull a gun on *me*, because I shoot fast and I shoot well. But only when necessary."

"Young lady, if that's the kind of thing you talk about, I can understand your desire for privacy. But it doesn't seem to be getting us anywhere." He started to take a sip of his drink and then thought better of it. He might find some other use for it.

"All right, let's get somewhere." She drank from her own glass and then leaned back comfortably with the little gun still pointed steadily at his midriff. "I travel a lot, you know," she began conversationally. "Europe, the United States, Canada, Mexico, the Caribbean, here and there. I get around, and I meet people."

Nick stiffened. He thought it most unlikely that he would have forgotten her if they had met before, but it was just possible. And it was increasingly evident that she had recognized him.

"Once, on the Riviera," she went on, "I met a nice old man whose name was—can you guess what?"

His heart seemed to sink an inch or two.

"Charles de Gaulle?" he hazarded. "Farouk?"

"Still making with the lousy jokes, hah?" Funny how her accent seemed to change. First it was English with the popsie talk; now it was American with the lousy jokes, hah. "No,

sweetheart." She smiled like a contented cat. "His name was Straven. Lord Simon Straven. Isn't that a lovely name?"

"Well, I don't know. It's been in the family for years. One gets used to it," Nick said modestly.

"I suppose one does," she agreed. "It didn't take you long, did it?"

"What do you mean?" As if he didn't know.

"Ducky, there's no need to be obtuse," she said patiently. "Lord Simon is a sweet, white-haired old man."

"I'm glad you think so," said Nick. "And you were lucky to meet him. The old man hasn't been out of London more than two or three times in the last ten years. The Riviera, now. That would be—about four years ago, wouldn't it?"

She beamed at him. "How clever of you. Quite true, he's almost a recluse, so they told me. Still, he hadn't forgotten much. One glass of bubbly and—well, that's my business. But we got along like a house on fire. He told me so much about himself. Now perhaps you'll do the same. Starting with why you're pretending to be Lord Simon Straven."

"I'm not pretending," said Nick.

"Of course you are." Her smile turned into a scowl. "I know him, I tell you, and I *mean* I know him. When that fellow down by the pool came with a message for Lord Straven and then *you* leaped up and nearly knocked me down, I knew there was something fishy going on. You're not Straven, any more than I am. He's a randy old goat, but he's nice and he's rich and he's about a hundred years old and you're not him."

"Shame on you." Nick grinned faintly. She cast a new light on the venerable Lord Straven. "That's no way to talk about my father."

"Your father?" For a moment she looked slightly disconcerted. But her recovery was quick. "Oh, no, you don't. He's got one dried-up stick of a daughter, and if you're it all I can say is that your disguise must be magnificent. No, buddy. Lord Simon has no sons."

And that was true. There were very few people in the world who knew anything about Lord Simon Straven, except the close knot of friends who had guaranteed to back up Nick's story in case of enquiry. He seldom went abroad, he did his business by letter or through Tommy Handberg, and the great disappointment of his life was that he had no son and heir. Hardly anybody outside of London and

possibly have known this. And Carter had to get lucky and bump into one of the very few people who did.

"Well, well, well," he said thoughtfully. "That's a most interesting story. Supposing it were true—and believe me, I can prove you wrong—just what do you think you can gain by it?"

She met his gaze steadily. "It is true, and you know it. I don't care what clever proof you can come up with, I'll still know you're lying and so will you. You're doing this for a reason, and I want to know that reason. I'm not going to leave this room until you tell me what it is."

"You're raving, girl," he said, and reached idly for his glass. "I don't believe you've ever been to the Riviera."

"I certainly ha—"

Nick jerked the glass forward with the suddenness of a striking snake and flung himself sideways out of his chair. Cold rum and even colder ice cubes slapped against her face and splashed down the front of her low-cut gown. She made a sound like a police siren and leaped to her feet, waving the little gun wildly and wiping her pretty, creamy-tanned neck with an agitated hand. He caught her gun arm and twisted it upward in one swift, relentless thrust. The little gun dropped to the floor and he kicked it away.

"Now," he said menacingly, "we'll do the talking *my* way."

Her scream turned into a little yelp of alarm as he pinned her hands in one of his and dragged her back to the chair. He seated himself comfortably and pulled her down on top of him, her firm breasts nuzzling into his knee and her shapely derriere clamped beneath the palm of his right hand. His legs scissored around hers.

"Leggo of me, you bastard!"

"Watch your language," he reproved her. "I warned you what was going to happen, and you went right ahead and made it worse. I'm going to ask you a few questions, Miss O'Reilly, baby, and you're going to answer me—or else." His hand rose quickly and descended on the small behind. There was a satisfying sound, and his hand stung.

"First. When did you start following me, and why?"

"Following you?" she squealed. "I haven't been doing anything of the sort! I told you, it was only after the man called you Straven that I even noticed you."

"Oh, come on, now." A series of slapping sounds, and a yelp. "You bumped into me three times and you didn't no

tice me? You'll have to do better than that. What were you trying to do, scrape acquaintance or lift my wallet?"

The blonde head turned and the sky-blue eyes blinked at him resentfully. "Neither! Those were accidents. You can hit me all you like, you sonofabitch, but they were accidents. I told you I was sorry, didn't I? Goddamn! Now I wish I'd hit you harder. No indeed, I didn't want you *or* your miserable wallet. It was just my bad luck I kept on running into you."

Nick stared into the blue eyes reflectively. There was something oddly convincing about her indignation. She gave a convulsive little wiggle and he slapped her down almost casually. So maybe she hadn't been following him.

"All right, let's try the next question. You think I'm not Straven. Why don't you go to the police, or G-2? Is it because you think you can blackmail me?"

"I won't answer your questions in this position! Put me down and I'll talk to you, damn you!"

Nick thought it over. This was quite enjoyable, in a way, but it wasn't getting him anywhere.

"If that's a promise—okay. But first, here's a little something for lying your way into my rooms and waving a gun at me." His hand came down hard, several times. Her outraged squeals were music to his ears. She was the least likely and most inefficient spy he had ever met; a Mata Hari with a sore behind.

"Ten . . . eleven . . . twelve," he finished, and stood up abruptly. She thudded to the floor and scrambled angrily to her feet.

"Why, you—" She stopped suddenly as Hugo clicked into Nick's hand. "There's no need for that!"

"Isn't there?" Nick described a graceful arc in the air with Hugo's icepick blade. Hugo was a stiletto which he found quite useful on occasions of this sort. Usually he didn't even have to use it. "Prove it to me, then, and be quick about it. Who are you, who sent you, and what do you want?"

She stamped her foot on the thick carpet. "Nobody sent me. Put that thing away. I know a conman when I see one. But my God, I didn't figure you for a killer. You're not Straven. But you're pretending to be him. That means you're expecting to get something out of it, right? And I'm on to you, right? Simon, Lord Straven! Ha! In a pig's eye! What-

ever you're up to, I want to be in on it. That's fair enough, isn't it? I found you out. You cut me in. That's it, and all about it."

"That's *all* about it?" Nick squinted at her incredulously.

"Well, not quite all," she admitted. "I expect to do my share. If you tell me what the caper is, I'll help. I won't ask much; a third, maybe, depending on the work. Plus your promise that you won't rough me up any more. There was no need for that." She glowered at him and rubbed her bottom soothingly.

"I think there was," said Nick. "And I also think you're out of your mind. If I had your help in my tobacco business—and I can assure you it's legitimate—I'd be ruined in a day. Now why don't you pick up that little toy of yours and leave quietly, before I get really angry?"

She stared at him. "Aren't you afraid I'll use it on you?"

"I don't see why you should," he said reasonably.

She knelted on the carpet and groped for her gun, still staring at him. "If you're so damn legitimate, what're you doing with that knife?"

"I use it to clean my fingernails. Would you rather I'd whipped out a machine gun and blown your head off?"

"Ha, ha," she said sourly, straightening up and putting the little gun into her evening bag. "I suppose you think you've won."

"Won? I don't even know what game we're playing. Still, I don't see why we can't be friends—and maybe we can be if you answer me one more question."

"So, what question?"

He flung it at her like an accusation. "Where is Star?"

"Wha—?" Her look was genuine puzzlement. "You mean Starr like Ringo? Star of India? I don't know any Star."

And unless she was a consummate actress, she didn't.

"That's a pity," he said regretfully. "Because that's the only way you could possibly have helped me. In that case, good-night, Miss O'Reilly." He eased her toward the hall. She shook his hand off her elbow and marched toward his front door.

"If you think you've seen the last of me," she said crisply, "you're wrong. I still think you're up to something, and I'm going to find out what it is. What's more, I liked old Straven. If it's him you're conning, I won't let you get away with it."

"That's a charming little afterthought," he said approvingly. "Too bad you didn't think of it before. Perhaps it would have been a better approach."

"Perhaps it would have been," she agreed thoughtfully. "And maybe it's not too late to try it. But I'm warning you, whoever you are—I'm not through yet." She opened the door and stood in the doorway. "I'm going to be watching you. I'm going to follow you wherever you go. And if I find out you've got anything I want, I'm going to take a slice of it."

"Tch. That's downright dirty talk."

"That's *not* what I meant!"

He grinned and stepped back as her open palm swung through the air inches in front of his face.

"Well, that's the chance you take if you—"

The door closed between them.

He double-locked it after her and made a careful search of his suite. She had been through everything, and she had done it with a neat and practiced hand. If it hadn't been for her own admission, and for the tiny traps he automatically laid for possible intruders, he would not have been able to tell that his clothes had been ever so slightly moved and his bags opened, shut, and carefully replaced where he had left them. She may have wondered why the larger of the two had been so heavy, but she hadn't found the answer. AXE's Documents Section was very good at devising concealed compartments that defied the most expert scrutiny.

Nick poured himself a fresh drink and did a little thinking. Her bag had been heavy, too.

He finished his drink, went downstairs, and left a little note for her with the night clerk. It was a blank note with nothing on it but her name and it would, he hoped, annoy her. He watched the clerk sliding it into a message slot numbered 1102, and went back upstairs to wait in his room. While he waited he stripped to his shorts and did a set of Yoga exercises. He had done them almost every day for many years, and it was because of them that he could recharge his bodily batteries under virtually impossible conditions and hold his breath for minutes longer than the average man. The only times when he had *not* done them were when he had been literally hoisted.

When the sweat glistened on his muscular rose and toweled himself dry. Moments 1.

stood on the landing outside room 1102 and worked very quietly with a strip of celluloid.

He opened the door just as quietly and walked into a dark room. It was on a much smaller scale than his lavish suite, probably just the room and a bath, and he could hear her soft breathing from where he stood in the tiny entrance hall. She was asleep, and sleeping alone. Still, no point in taking chances. He drew a deep breath, held it, and took Pepito out of his pocket. Then he catfooted across the carpet toward the sound of the breathing. It was unchanged. Pepito twisted open. The little marble-shaped capsule spread its harmless, soporific fumes into the air.

Nick gave himself a moment to get accustomed to the contours of the room. Bed here, bureau there; here the windows, there the bathroom door; two chairs, three lamps, small desk, and closet door. He padded into the bathroom and opened the window, sucking in a deep draught of the cool night air as he did so. Out of the bathroom; close the door; look down at her face in the beam of the tiny pencil flashlight.

She was sleeping like a baby, her yellow-gold hair splashed over the pillow and her lips slightly parted to show small, perfect teeth. The little sleeping-gas pellet had done its work.

His search was quick but thorough. Once he went back into the bathroom and breathed more fresh air while he poked expertly into her cosmetic jars. The rest of the time he spent probing into the bureau drawers and the baggage, in her pockets, under the bed and mattress, even behind the gaudy pictures on the walls. But it was in a heavy bag she had dropped on his foot at the airport that he found what he was looking for. The false bottom, concealed by sweet-smelling jars of feminine this and that, clicked open at his expert touch. He stared at the contents of the secret compartment, surprised and yet not surprised at all.

It took him a very short time to put things back in order. He went back into the bathroom to close the window—and saw, for the second time, the sturdy plastic wastebasket intended for discarded towels. A thought came to him. It was much too schoolboyish to entertain. He wouldn't do it; he couldn't do it.

He did it. He took out the towels it contained and slung them back over the rack. He filled the plastic container with water from the tub. He backed out of the bathroom, eased

he door toward him, and reached his long arms up to balance the container precariously on top of the door. For one wild moment he thought his water bomb was going to go off prematurely, but then it swayed gently into place and stood there waiting for whoever might pass beneath it next. He smiled beatifically to himself.

She was still asleep, lovely as ever and so very innocent. Or was she? Nick leaned over and kissed her lightly on the lips. She stirred and murmured in her sleep.

He left her then, and went back to his room. And again he thought about her. This time he repeated to himself exactly what she had said, and reviewed in his mind what he had found in her room.

It hadn't been much. Some very beautiful clothes, rather a lot of money, and a bag with a false bottom.

And in the secret compartment he had found—a set of burglar's tools.

ME AND MY SHADOW . . .

Carmela Ruiz-Jones, who had long ago traded in her surname for one she considered more suitable, faced the long mirror and adjusted her earrings with care. They were pendant teardrops, daringly large and glitteringly bright, and few women could have worn them without being dominated by their conspicuous flashiness. But they did not dominate Carmela; rather, they seemed to complement her vividness. The cat-green eyes drew color from them and glowed with an even brighter flame, and the dark hair took on the look of a moonless midnight.

She patted a stray strand into place and surveyed herself appraisingly. The carefully groomed raven hair stopped just short of her ears and swept up in a tall beehive coiffure that was saved from severity by the soft, jet-black curls that framed her wide forehead. Apart from the huge earrings and a fiery bracelet, she wore no jewelry; she needed none. She

was brightness and color in herself. A touch more perfume . . . there. It was expensive, but she had plenty of it. No need to stint herself. And she knew just how much extra she could get away with. Earrings, a touch larger than most other women could carry off; perfume, a dab more; dress, a fraction tighter and cut just a little lower down the swelling bosom. She stepped back and ran her hands down over her hips to smooth out the green metallic fabric of her gown, and then brought them up beneath her subtly jutting breasts. Not bad she thought objectively; not bad at all. Full as they were and even though they were gently restrained by lacy little cups of underthings, they actually needed no support. Still young, she thought. Still firm. Still desirable, and still desiring.

"Carlos, Carlos," she whispered, her voice as sultry and vibrant as her compelling appearance. "Don't wait too long. I am not good at waiting."

Carmela stalked slowly down the curved length of the staircase leading from her private rooms into the roulette room of Havana's newest night spot, Casa Del Jaguar. She knew she stalked almost like a jaguar herself, and she knew she was flamboyant. And she made the most of it. It was her talent. Once in a while she thought about herself as she had been; always vital, always vibrant, though not always as successful as she was today. Carmela Ruiz-Jones. No Jones was not the name for her, which was why she had changed it. But even with her glamorous new name and magnetic personality she had had some hard times before Carlos had come along. That, of course, had been the fault of the Bearded One. She bore no grudges, though. Life was good these days.

There was only one small thing wrong. She got so lonely waiting.

Her head bowed gracefully every now and then. Pepe . . . Manolo . . . Pedro . . . Tonio . . . all on the job and bowing back deferentially to the woman they called *their boss*. Once in a while she unleashed a particularly ravishing smile at one of the men she liked a little better than the others, or at a new customer with a wealthy look about him, or in reply to a look of admiration.

Music played softly in the background, an echo from the subtly lavish restaurant. Glasses tinkled as bar waiters brought liquid encouragement to those who were just begin-

ning to gather at the gaming tables. Another evening was getting under way. And perhaps tonight would be the night.

She frowned.

"Armando," she called, her voice only slightly raised and directed toward the tall form of a man whose back was turned to her. He was gesticulating excitedly, almost angrily, and people were beginning to notice. She did not like her staff members to make themselves conspicuous. Also, she did not like the man he was talking to, a wiry little weasel called El Cano.

Armando turned swiftly, acknowledging her with a lift of his dark eyebrows. He dismissed the man with a sharp movement of his hand and a low command she could not hear.

"Ah, Señorita!" he said, and made his way toward her. She saw the other man hesitate, glance quickly at her, and then turn away with his cane tapping irritably on the floor.

"Señorita, tonight you are even more beautiful than usual." Armando's handsome, mustachioed face smiled down at her. She was tall, but he was a full head taller, and there was no doubt that he had charm. "How do you manage it? You are loveliness personified." And she really is, he thought. There is still a trace of the old coarseness, but there is no doubt that she has a certain style about her.

She felt the warmth of the compliment glow inside her. It was good to be flattered by this undeniably attractive man. Ah, yes. She remembered that she had not called him over to exchange pleasantries.

"Good evening, Armando," she said coolly. "Would you please tell me what you were doing with that bestial little man? I know that he is an associate of Carlos' and therefore, presumably, of mine, but you know that I don't like him and will not have him here. And as if that were not enough, you are arguing again, and quite loudly, too. That is not good for the Casino. If the customers want to argue with each other, that is one thing. But you are not a customer. Please conduct yourself more discreetly."

He smiled to himself at her choice of language. How she had improved! "Ah, Señorita, you wrong me—"

"Perhaps I do. But I expect you to do what I ask. You are my Casino manager, and you are supposed to know what is good for the Casino. Your arguments are *not* good for it, and furthermore, I do not want that man in this place!" Her voice was firm but low-pitched, free of the slight raucous-

ness of earlier days and inaudible to anyone but Armando

"Señorita, that is what the argument was about. He came here uninvited, with some little business matter to discuss and I was telling him to leave. He objected. I'm afraid I raised my voice."

"I notice he left the moment he saw me," she observed. "And what was the little business matter, may I ask?"

Armando shrugged. "He will have to tell me later, in my office. Please, Señorita, there are a lot of things, small things, that there is no need for you to bother about but that I must take care of in order to keep this place running as a smooth operation. There are irritations, but you should regard them as my problem." His manner was suave and ingratiating, and not—she thought—unattractive. "Why should you concern yourself with trifles? I am your right hand—you must please trust me to take care of everything. You can be assured that I only want what is good for the place. And also," he added, dropping his voice to a near-whisper, "I want what is good for you. Don't you understand that? How could I want anything but the very best for you when you forgive me—when you entrance me so!" There was something almost shy about his smile.

She wasn't sure about the smile. Shyness didn't seem to have much in common with the self-assured Armando. But she was sure about the compliment. Hadn't men always wanted her? Hadn't men always given her what she wanted? Or nearly always? She accepted what he said as the simple truth. Obviously, she entranced him. Her eyes wandered up and down his well-built length, admiring the fit of his evening clothes over the tapered hips and sturdy shoulders. He was not without his points, himself.

"Please, Armando. Don't expect me to be taken in by your flattery." Her tone was still cool, but not quite so cool as before. "Just do your job and do it well, that's all I ask."

"Yes, Señorita," he said humbly, but his thoughts were far from humble. One of these days, he thought, and soon I'll look down into your eyes and they'll be warm, and I'll touch the softness of your body in the darkness of your bedroom, and you will forget yourself with me.

"Dispense usted, Señorita." Carmela turned. One of her upstairs servants stood bowing beside her. "Your telephone, if you please."

She dismissed Armando with a nod, turning as though it

didn't really matter and wasn't at all important, but her stride was a little quicker than usual as she went upstairs. To Armando, her interest was obvious. He turned away, wondering how long it would be before she tired of a man she seldom saw—and when she would be ripe for him.

"Yes, darling," she said into the phone, to the man who was everything in her life. He had brought her, almost literally, out of the gutter; protected her, given her good clothes, money, and even the Casino. Under his expert guidance she had smoothed off the rough edges of her voice and learned how to wear her lovely new clothes; under his loving touch she had begun to dream of a future when she would be Señora Carlos Ramon Y'Ortega, envied and respected by all.

"Carmela, my love," his warm voice said. "I miss you terribly."

"I miss you, too, sweetheart," she breathed. "When will I see you, Carlos? It's been so long . . . I want you."

"Carmela, you must bear with me. Try not to be disappointed. I had hoped it would be soon—tonight, tomorrow night—but that is impossible. I am calling only to say I love you. Next week, perhaps, we will make up for it."

"Next week, perhaps!" she wailed. "Carlos, I am not made of stone. I don't want to wait that long. A month ago, you said—"

"Carmela." The warmth was gone from the voice. "We have an agreement, and don't you forget it. You knew how it was going to be." The harsh sound softened slightly. "This won't last forever. One of these days we'll be together and we'll stay together, and then you'll know it's all been worth it. But don't . . . don't start nagging me."

"Oh, Carlos, of course I won't. It's just that I need you, not just your voice on the telephone."

"And I need you too, my love. But we're working together, remember, and there's something I want you to do." The voice became brisk and businesslike. "Go to the bank tomorrow and transfer 50,000 pesos from the Casino account to the hotel account. My new shareholder hasn't come through with a check yet and we're running a little low on funds. I'll make it up to you as soon as he pays up. Will you do that, sweetheart? And early, please. I want to draw on it almost immediately."

"Yes, I'll do it, Carlos, but—"

"Good, sweetheart. The new funds will be coming in cash and we'll have to siphon it to the bank gradually as if from the Casino, as we usually do, but that's something we can discuss next time. And we'll do something else next time, Carmela, I promise you. Don't ever forget that I want you, too." He hung up abruptly, as he always did. But this time she felt resentment building in her. He could have said something a little more loving, after all the weeks of separation. But instead of that, no; he had to be even more cold and sudden than usual.

She replaced the dainty gold-handled phone in its cradle and felt her heart drop like a lump of heavy dough. He did not care. He only pretended that he cared. A private telephone call to her apartment, and all he could say was, "Next week, perhaps." Pig! Her eyes snapped. He had called for no reason at all except to ask her help with his foolish bank business. And where was he, God knew. At the hotel site, probably, with some other woman.

Carmela fumed. True, before she had met him and he had rescued her, she had just been a girl at any bar, bought for the price of a drink and a twenty-dollar bill. While the Americans were still coming to Havana it had been a different story; she could pick and choose and raise her prices to the limit of what the traffic could bear. Then came the slump. The Bearded One, few tourists, and hard times. Carlos had found her just in time. He had taken her away from Al. That, and given her a life of luxury. There was even hope that, if she played her cards right, she would end up as his wife. Healthy, wealthy, Señora Carlos Ramon Y'Ortega.

Damn him all to hell! So she had been a whore, and he had saved her. In the privacy of her gilded room she flung her arms out in a gesture of frustration. Saved her for what? At least, for twenty dollars a time, she had given of herself and received something in return. Something physical and masculine, something that she ached for and needed desperately. A telephone! She picked up the offending instrument and flung it from her with a curse.

If he couldn't give her what she wanted, she would find it somewhere else. And there were still rich men in Havana. Rich men and hungry. She saw them at the gambling tables every night.

Well?

Well.

Carmela carefully repaired her make-up and stalked indolently down the curved staircase leading to the roulette room.

"Much better," Nick said approvingly. "And very handy for me, too. While you were having your hair rejuvenated I got all kinds of business done."

Alison O'Reilly smiled at him very sweetly and took a sip of his cocktail. She was in a much better mood now than when she'd cornered him at breakfast with her blonde hair still wet and unruly from its unexpected shower.

"Order me one, won't you? I'll have a daiquiri. Thank you so much. And I've had a lovely day. Palace, Castle, library, that nice restaurant, the beach—by the way, what did you want from the library? Oh, never mind, I was bored there anyway. And those delightful business friends of yours. They did *so* want to meet me, didn't they? I thought they seemed very pleased when I came over, even though you were trying so hard to shake me off. Didn't you think they liked me?"

"Mm-hmm. Here's your drink. Please try not to knock it over."

"Silly. I haven't knocked anything over all day."

"No, but I thought I saw you stepping on Garcia's toe."

"It was his fault. He said so himself. What did you do while I was having my hair done?"

"Ha!" Nick grinned at her. "You had a tough choice to make, didn't you? Lose sight of me, or go around looking like a hag. I'm glad you made the right decision. Me, I cased the National Museum looking for the Star of Cuba. My friend José Cabrera said he'd seen it there. But I guess he was wrong; either it never was there, or they've sold it to help pay for the revolution." He watched her over the rim of his glass. She still seemed to have no reaction at all to Trainor's cover name.

"Star! You've got it on the brain. He was probably pulling your leg. There isn't any Star of Cuba." Her manner was matter-of-fact and she was sipping her cocktail as though it was all she was interested in at the moment.

"You're sure of that, are you?" He was intrigued by the knowledge she had shown regarding Cuban treasures and resources.

"Of course I am. What did you think it would be, a giant

have some fun, don't you? There's the Casino right downstairs, and the Tropicana Club, and the Caribe, and a new place called the Casa Del Jaguar, which I'm told has an excellent floor show as well as the hottest gambling tables in town. . . ."

It was almost midnight before they reached the fabulous Casa Del Jaguar and left their names and addresses with the resplendent and muscular attendant near the door.

"Now why do they do that?" demanded Alison, as they followed another uniform to their ringside table.

"Hmm? Oh. I suppose to check up on us if we start playing heavily. Most gambling clubs keep tabs on strangers."

They sat down, ordered, and watched the floor clear as the dance band played its last emphatic note and broke up for a breather. A small combo took its place, rilling out a vivid tonal background to the tall and striking women who stalked sensuously on of the dancers and took her place beneath the spotlight.

She undulated to the microphone and spread out her arms in a gesture so warm and embracing that every man in the room, Nick was sure, would willingly have leapt right into them. Minklike green fabric shimmered, hair sprayed glittered, braids revealed their intention. All eyes were fixed in a knowing but generous smile, and the lovely bird, so soft invitingly to the crowd's sympathy, took the crowd roared with approval.

was born with that name, so was I. What's the matter with you, Sime? You have a funny look on your face." She eyed him curiously. "Estrella, hah? That's Spanish, I suppose you know, for Star."

STORY OF A STARRY NIGHT

"So it is." He smiled at her and patted her hand. "Clever girl. Is that why you brought me here?"

She snatched her hand away and shot him an indignant look. "Don't be ridiculous. You wanted to come here as much as I did. And I never heard her stupid name before. You're a funny duck, aren't you?"

"I'm a riot," he said sourly. There was something about this girl that made him feel as though his mind was slowly crumbling.

"Ah, she's finished, thank God." Alison was watching Carmela Estrella through narrowed eyes. "Now perhaps we can hear ourselves think. She has a voice like a tuba, that woman. Look, she's talking to her bouncer. They're probably having an affair. Okay, Simon Straven." She tore her eyes away from the dazzling Carmela and fixed them on Nick. "It's time we had another talk. And it's no use making your silly little threats, because I've got you pegged by now and whatever you're up to, you're not about to kill me. Ha! The old water bucket trick! Dangerous killer type, aren't you? What a lousy trick, anyway." Her brow clouded fleetingly. "Well, I can manage to forget it if you cooperate with me. But you've been holding out on me with this Star business. I told you I'd do my share if—"

"Get lost!" he said suddenly.

"What?" She stared at him.

"Get lost, I tell you. Go to the lady's room and stay there, go home, anything. No! Argue with me. Get mad and then walk out." Nick squeezed her hand and spoke with rapid intensity. He had seen Carmela go over the "bouncer's"

list and then glance his way. At the moment she was threading her way between the tables, more or less in his direction, stopping briefly now and then with a word of greeting. The hunch that had flickered when he'd heard her name was rapidly building into a determination to talk to her alone, and soon. "Listen, you promised to cooperate, to work with me. This is your big chance. Fight with me—go off in a huff. Go back to the hotel and I'll see you later."

"Ha! So there is something in the works!" She looked triumphant. "And you don't want me gumming them up, is that it? Well, if that's the way you feel about it, Simon Straven, you can just give me my coat check and I'll get it myself. And you needn't try following me out. I'll have that bouncer beat your brains out." She thrust her chair back and stamped to her feet. "Son of a gun, if you think she's so gorgeous, you can have her!" She winked once, quickly, and flounced away. Somehow she managed to stumble over an outstretched leg on her way along the edge of the dance floor, but she recovered quickly and marched furiously over to the hatcheck counter. Amused glances followed her along her way. Some of them swung around to have a look at Nick. He grinned and shrugged, making that gesture with his hands that means, Well, fellas, you know Women.

Good girl. She'd reacted fast, and well. And she no doubt has her own little motive for obeying, Nick thought, shaking his head. Well, he'd worry about that later.

He was applying himself to his drink and the girlie floor show when he heard the low chuckle beside him. A chair scraped back and a strong but pleasant whiff of perfume breezed into his nostrils. He looked up and rose gallantly to his feet.

"No, no, please sit down. Do you mind if I join you for a moment?" Carmela's full red lips and startlingly green eyes smiled at him.

"I would be thrilled," he said sincerely.

She sat, still smiling. "You have been deserted, I see. I am sorry that your lovely little friend did not seem to be enjoying herself. A small quarrel, perhaps? It will pass over, I am sure. But I am glad that you have stayed."

"To tell you the truth," he lied, "we were arguing because of you. She's young, you know, and very jealous, and I'm afraid she didn't like the way I looked at you. Admiringly, I

must confess?" He repeated the look he might have given if he had been really smitten. She lapped it up.

"And you an English Lord?" Carmela laughed throatily. "Oh, yes. Of course I know who you are. I make it my business to know who comes into my Club. You do not care for gambling? Or why do you not try out the tables?"

"I love to gamble," he said earnestly. "But not on tables. I made a bet with myself that I would meet you before the night was out. And I won my bet. Now I'd like to make another one. Will you let me win it?"

Her green eyes smoldered darkly. "That depends on what it is."

"You name the stakes. But I will bet you this. That you will allow me to offer you more than—let's say, any other man you know." His steel-gray eyes bored into hers. Deliberately, he oozed sex-appeal, self-assurance, wealth.

She looked at him and saw a man with a strong, hard face and a wide mouth that was cruel and smiling at the same time. He was big and muscular, probably big all over, and yet there was a grace about him that made her think he could be gentle even while he showed his strength. He was titled, he was wealthy, and he had a kind of savage masculine beauty that stirred her as she wanted to be stirred. And at the same time there was that cruel, sweet gentleness about him that made her think that she could use him . . . wonderfully.

"I don't know if you have won your bet or lost it," she said softly. "I think we will have to know each other a little better first. If you want to do that, you might dine with me one hour from now. Walk up the curved staircase from the roulette room and come to my apartment. My servant will show you in. There we will eat and drink . . . and talk. And . . . name the stakes."

Her lips parted and the brilliant earrings glittered. Then he rose gracefully and left, stalking softly like a taut-muscle panther among her paying guests.

Armando watched her as she walked. Nick played the tables. Won a little, lost a little, won some more. Lost again. And thought about the two very different women he had met.

One hour later he was shown into her rooms. She rose from the vanity table where she had dropped her

dazzling earrings, and locked the door between them and the muted gaiety of the Casino.

"I hear that you are not a winner," she murmured. "But you keep betting, do you not?"

"I do," he said huskily, thinking that Alison made infinitely better conversation. "And this time I really want to win." His arms went around her and his lips crushed down on hers. After a minute he drew back, panting slightly for effect. "Or am I too precipitate?" It was impossible not to notice how rapidly her heart was beating.

"That is a big word, Simon. I don't know what it means. You will show me, maybe?"

This time her arms encircled him and her lips sought his.

The warmth of her body burned against him. Her hands stroked over the fine fabric that fitted his broad back so beautifully, slid up and over his shoulders, down his arms, back onto his body and down his thighs. It was just as well he had decided not to bring his Luger, Wilhelmina, or she would certainly have found the gun by now and possibly have asked an awkward question.

She kissed as though she was drinking sweet water in the desert after days of burning thirst—with breathless eagerness but also a kind of gratitude that made her savor his lips gently. Her breasts pressed against his chest and the heady perfume of her body was almost intoxicating. He felt her pulse against him, and the low heat became a brightly burning flame. It was impossible not to be affected by her ardor; just as impossible not to return the warmth with interest. Nick felt the stirring in him and drew her thighs closer against his. His hand clasped and caressed one of her bold breasts while his tongue explored her mouth with rapidly growing enthusiasm.

He came up for air when he felt her rub herself against him with open invitation. Then she pulled herself away, gasping, and breathed, "Not yet, not yet, not yet! But soon."

"That is what it means to be precipitate," he murmured, running his hands down her body in the same softly probing way that she had used on him. She quivered slightly at his touch. "I am too sudden for you, am I?" he went on quietly. "Perhaps you will be angry, and tell me to leave. But please don't. I want to stay; I want to be with you."

"Don't go," she sighed. "You *are* sudden. I should tell you to go. But I cannot do it. And we are not children, are we?"

I know," she whispered. "I think we should celebrate with some champagne."

He brought the bottle and the glasses to the bedroom and they drank together, in silence at first but gradually beginning to exchange short murmurings.

"Estrella," he said at last. "My Star. A very pretty name. Carmela Estrella. Is it really yours?"

She laughed. "Carmela, yes; Estrella, no. I changed it long ago because I thought it sounded glamorous. Silly, I suppose. But now I have become so used to it, I have almost forgotten my old name. Anyway, Carlos thought 'Estrella' was a suitable sort of name for someone running a casino. Although I am not so sure it would suit the manager of a luxury hotel. Those I have met are usually very formal in a continental sort of way—cool and polite, and terribly superior." Her mouth curved into a smile that held the slightest touch of self-mockery. "I shall be oh so polite and possibly quite dignified, but I think perhaps I am not so very formal."

Nick muzzled her ear affectionately. "I'm glad you're not," he murmured, his mind clicking busily with new thoughts like "Carlos" and "hotel." "But do you mean to say you also manage a hotel?"

She rubbed her head against his face and almost purred. "Ah, how sweet you are, my Simon. So strong, but so very tender. . . . Oh, the hotel. No, not yet. It is still being built. These things seem to take so long; I don't know when it will be ready."

He sipped champagne, which was not his favorite drink, and softly stroked her hair. "I think you would make a wonderful manager. I should love to stay in your hotel. Where will it be—here in Havana? I haven't seen much building going on."

Her fingers traced a ticklish pattern on his back. "No, no, not Havana. It will be a resort hotel in the mountains. You know, Castro's mountains—the Sierra Maestra. About thirty miles from Santiago de Cuba. It is very beautiful there, if you like all that fresh air and scenery. But I am glad it is no further from Santiago. I am not what you might call a country girl."

"No, I would say not," he agreed, sliding his hand slowly down her thigh. "But I expect your hotel will not be exactly rustic, will it? I wish I could see it. I suppose you go there often, to see how it's progressing."

She shrugged against him and clasped her roving hand around his waist. "I have been there once; just once. All I did was inspect the site and look over some of the workers as they arrived. Well, not so much the workers as the architects and the designer and I suppose construction engineers. But I have nothing to do with the details of building. Carlos takes care of all that. He says that he does not even want me there until it is nearly finished. A surprise; he says." Her voice held a touch of bitterness. "It will surprise me if it is ever finished."

"But these things do take a long time," Nick said soothingly.

"Too long; too long." She sighed and leaned her head on his shoulder. "Sometimes I wonder if it is worth waiting for."

Nick put his arm around her and cupped his hand over one soft, warm breast. "Good things are always worth waiting for," he said sententiously. "Who is this Carlos, that he makes you wait?"

"He is—a business associate. What you might call my manager." She raised her head from Nick's shoulder and looked fixedly at her champagne glass. "Financial backer. Business adviser, so to say." She almost said something else but stopped herself with a quick little intake of breath.

"I see," Nick said softly. "Then I am perhaps intruding here."

"No!" Her hand dropped away from him. "I do as I please with my personal life. It is nothing to do with anyone else, if I want you here—if I want any visitors here—that is, if I want any—of course you are not intruding."

"But he may think so, might he not?" Nick pulled her closer to him. "Please tell me, Carmela. It is too soon for me to talk like this, but I am fascinated by you." You and your name and your hotel and your absent boyfriend, he would more truthfully have said. "If you belong to someone else, someone who means a great deal to you, I will just be thankful that we met and quietly go on my way. But—" He sighed deeply and buried his face in her hair. The black coiffure had loosened into a thick and luscious mass, soft as cornsilk and fragrant with a musky scent. His voice was low and muffled when he spoke again. "There was no one else there wasn't anyone else. Perhaps like one-night stands. Whenever he's that I can give you twice as much."

that he must have meant something to you. Don't try to spare my feelings; many men must have loved you, if only from afar. I don't blame them. But I would rather have you all to myself. And I can make you very, very happy." Just how he proposed to do this he wasn't prepared to say. Instead, he held her naked body even closer and kissed the soft valley between her breasts.

"Oh, Simon," she murmured, putting her hands behind his head and clutching her to him as though afraid he might get away, "it's true. I loved him. But my love is dying from neglect. He is a business machine, that man, and I am not. No, I do not belong to anyone—not yet." She raised his head gently and kissed him lingeringly on the mouth.

There was a long silence, broken only by the gentle sighing of the bedsprings and the rustling, gasping sounds of two agile bodies intertwining.

It was difficult, after that, to draw the conversation back to a hotel in the mountains. But he tried.

"I should like to see that mountain place," he murmured. "With you. Perhaps I could even buy him out, invest in it myself. Do you think that you can take me there?"

"I don't think I could even find it again," she said, "without him as a guide. And I'm not sure that would be a very good idea, do you?" Her laugh was gentle and suggestive.

He tried again. She answered him, but she was vague. Too vague, he thought. Too elusive in reply. Yes, it was true that building licenses were hard to get, but Carlos had managed it—somehow. Yes, perhaps it was a little strange that no one—not even she, Carmela—was supposed to see the hotel until it was completed, but it was, she told him, to be so unique in design and so cleverly in keeping with the terrain that it would be unwise to let competitors see it before it was ready for the public. How could it be so very different? Oh, she didn't know. Please fill our glasses, darling Simon. And what was Carlos (a note of fake jealousy in Carter's voice) that he, in these days of Cuban austerity, was able to build not only a luxury Casino but an even more luxurious hotel? Was he that rarest of all creatures, a wealthy Cuban? No, my dear, of course not. He is Spanish. His real business is in Spain, importing Havana cigars. Oh. Havana cigars. What an interesting coincidence. But why so many questions, Simon? Because I'm jealous—jealous, I tell you. Please, Carmela, please be mine.

"Oh, my darling," she murmured, and tousled his thick hair.

Suddenly he could stay with her no more, asking questions and getting answers he was sure were half-truths. He was certain he had found Trainor's "Star." But he was less than certain about her real connection with the shadows in the mountain. It was time to go there and find out.

He began to dress. "Carmela, I have to go away. I have business in Pinar del Rio, but I'll be back within the week. Carmela—" he leaned down and touched his lips to her scented hair. "While I'm gone, please think about me. And only me. I love you—please be waiting for me. Oh, darling, I love you desperately. I want you to be mine. Just mine and no one else's."

"Oh, Simon, I will think about you. You will come back to me, you promise?"

"I promise you, Carmela." They kissed again. "But what about that girl?" she said suddenly. "The one you came here with tonight."

He sighed gustily. "That girl! She is impossible. I can't get rid of her. You've no idea how glad I was when she walked out on me. She's been following me ever since I got to Cuba and driving me absolutely around the bend. Maybe now she'll realize that she isn't wanted."

Carmela chuckled throatily. "My poor Simon. But you can't blame her, dearest. She's probably madly in love with you. A good-looking English Lord, after all. What can you expect?"

"To choose my own women," Nick growled. "And I've chosen you."

Once again they fondled, exchanging promises and kisses. A little later she led him down a carpeted back stairway to a door leading onto a quiet street. Late though it was the sounds from the Casino still drifted to them from the main rooms of the club.

"I'll be back," Nick promised. "And you'll be waiting just for me, won't you?"

"I will, I will, I will!"

He stepped out into the starlit night wondering if she was not, even now, heading for the little gold-handled telephone he'd seen and placing a call to the mysterious Carlos. There had been a strange glow in her eyes that was not easy to

interpret. He wished he could be sure about what she was thinking.

But that was one thing he need not have worried about.

Upstairs, Carmela ran hot water and scented oil into the king-sized bathtub and thought: Lady Straven. Lady Simon Straven. The Honorable Lady Carmela. . . . It was so much more attractive than Señora Ortega. And Carlos was smooth, cold beast. Oh, he had been exciting to begin with but even at his best he could not hold a candle to the bold and virile Lord Straven.

Outside, Nick walked quickly down the quiet street.

Behind him another man detached himself from the shadows and followed him like a silent ghost.

RETURN OF A BAD PENNY

Thirty miles from Santiago de Cuba is a long way from Pinar del Rio, which is Cuba's lush tobacco land. And perhaps if he had told her he was really going to Santiago—which he was—he might have drawn an interesting reaction. But reactions were no longer what he wanted. It was time to call the plays himself.

Nick left the quiet street, walked down another, and entered a broad boulevard still occupied by late-night stragglers. His shadow silently maintained the gap between them.

There was not a taxi to be had. Nick went on walking, thinking about a hotel in the Sierra Maestras and a batch of aerial photographs that had something indefinably wrong about them. It seemed highly unlikely that anyone would want to hide a new resort hotel. And yet someone—Carlos Ramon Y'Ortega—was trying to do just that.

But the area pointed up by the grid pattern was more than thirty miles from Santiago. Not much more; thirty-seven and a half, to be as precise as one could get. Perhaps the photographs had nothing to do with the luxury hotel. Perhaps. Carmela had lied? Possibly. But why, then, had she

volunteered anything at all? A trap, maybe, one that would lead him on without taking him to the right place. He should have found some way of asking her about Trainor. Difficult, though, on that oval bed, to change the subject quite so radically. Carmela had told him what she thought to be the truth? Possibly. Even though she had been there once, she need not know the exact location. Steep, winding roads, some of them little more than dirt tracks straying through the trees, make distance hard to judge. And Carlos, for reasons of his own, could deliberately have kept her in the dark. But why, if they were working together, and she was the "Star" of Trainor's message?

He gave up temporarily and concentrated on searching for a cab. Eventually he gave that up, too, and cut across the wide boulevard to turn down a narrower street that he knew would offer him a short-cut to the Nacional. His shadow began to close the gap.

It was a residential street, and very quiet.

So quiet that Nick could hear the scuffle of cats from a garden that must have been almost a block away. So very quiet that he could hear soft footsteps when there was no one in sight. He slowed to light a cigarette. The footsteps slowed down, too.

Instead of taking the straight road to his hotel he abruptly turned a corner and then walked very fast until he'd covered a block. The footsteps followed rapidly.

He walked on, then, at an easy pace, waiting for whatever was to come, but making one more turn that would take him close to a low, modern building he knew was somewhere near at hand. He had seen it earlier in the day and remembered where it was within a block or two. Considering that he'd left his Luger Wilhelmina home in bed he might have to make use of that small building and its occupants. "I say, officer," he could hear himself saying, "I don't want to make trouble, but I do believe that man is following me." He grinned faintly at his thoughts and walked on with the long strides that looked casual but were geared to let him pivot on the balls of his feet at the slightest warning of approaching danger.

And danger seemed to be approaching rapidly. The soft-shoed steps were quicker now, as if his follower did not care where Nick was going but only that he did not get there.

The man was only yards behind, still moving quietly but with a haste that seemed to indicate he knew there was a police station somewhere up ahead and that his business would have to be done quickly.

Nick stopped and swung around.

"And what," he said pleasantly, "can I do for you, *amigo*?"

"Hah!" The man stumbled to a clumsy stop and stood there with his mouth hanging open. For one incredulous moment Nick thought his follower must be Alison in disguise. No one else, surely, could be quite so inept an attacker. But the illusion vanished with one abrupt and menacing movement. A snub-nosed gun appeared magically in the man's hand and pointed at Nick's heart. A slit of a mouth opened and a grating voice said: "You come with me. No noise, pliz."

"And what if I don't?"

The gun's nose flicked. "You will come." The voice was all confidence and contempt.

Nick shrugged. "Okay, so I come. Ready or not, buddy, here I come!" His Yoga-trained body raised effortlessly off the ground and flew forward with one leg outstretched and the other tucked beneath him. The shoe-encased ball of his left foot shot out to the side, slammed against the gun arm, and landed lightly on the sidewalk while his right foot swung up and rammed the gunman in the breast. The gun flew. The man grunted and went down heavily. Nick jumped him where he lay, landing with excruciating exactness on the outflung, writhing body and hearing the ribs crack hideously. Not nice, Carter, he reposed himself, chopping viciously at the neck just above the left shoulder blade for good measure. But effective. The man lay still, pulverized in a matter of seconds and breathing like an ancient automobile running out of gas.

Nick pocketed the gun and looked around. He and his wheezing companion were still alone in the quiet street. Swiftly, he went through pockets, taking every movable thing he could find—money, papers, keys, identification.

The police station, he reckoned, was about two blocks away. No reason why the cops couldn't still make themselves useful. And it would be an unkind thing to leave an injured man lying in the streets.

He hoisted the gunman into walking position and slung one limp arm over his shoulder, clamping it there with his

right hand and sliding his left arm around the waist. When he was ready to move he looked to all the world like some faithful friend escorting his drunk companion home. It took exceptional strength to carry a man for long in that position, but AXE instructors taught their trainees well.

It was a slow, uncomfortable trip. One or two cats passed without stopping.

All was quiet outside the police station. If there had been a police car there he would have turned his burden over to them gratefully, with a hastily dreamed up story; but there wasn't, and he was glad.

He deposited his burden quietly in the doorway, dusted himself off, and glided happily away. Pity he hadn't found out who had sent Softshoe, but one couldn't have everything. At least the fuzz would have something to do when they woke up. And Softshoe would be well out of action for many days to come.

But that he had been followed from the cinema and told to come with me, pliz, was an illuminating thought.

The first light of dawn was touching the city when he got back to the hotel. He hesitated curiously at the door, people in sight, like a man who has enjoyed his night on the town, and went upstairs.

His key jammed slightly as it slid into the lock, but not enough to seriously interfere with getting up the door. He entered quietly. This time there were only two cats, just at the far end of the hall, and he was alone.

She reached into her bag.

"Oh, not the gun again," he groaned.

"Don't be an idiot," she snapped. "I got the cable."

"What cable?"

"You *know* what cable. I told you I was going to send a cable. Here's the answer." She flung it at him crossly. Nick picked the crumpled paper off the floor and smoothed it out. A slow grin spread across his face.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR THOUGHTFUL QUERY, the message began cordially. YES I REMEMBER YOU AND RIVIERA VERY MEMORABLE WISH YOU WERE HERE BUT AT LEAST WE CAN BE TOGETHER BY PROXY DO NOT WORRY ABOUT SIMON APPRECIATE YOUR CONCERN BUT CAN ASSURE YOU ALL IS WELL OR WAS WHEN HE LEFT HERE THREE DAYS AGO DON'T KNOW WHY HE LOOKS BAD BUT SUSPECT HANG-OVER BEST ADVICE TO YOU BOTH IS TAKE IT EASY —WARM REGARDS STRAVEN.

Nick felt the laughter welling up inside him. Alison looked

How marvelously subtle! But why didn't you just tell him you suspected I was an impostor?"

"I *explained* that to you when I told you I was sending it," she snapped impatiently. "You *know* G-2 snoops into everything, and if I'd said it straight they'd have been down on us both like a pack of vultures. And that wouldn't have helped either of us, would it?"

"It couldn't have hurt me," he pointed out. "The old man would have cabled back something like SIMON STRAVEN ABSOLUTELY BONA FIDE and then you would have been alone in the soup. So don't pretend you've been protecting *me*."

"Yes, but I didn't expect him to say that!" It was a squeal of frustration. "He was supposed to say something like THANK YOU WAS UNAWARE OF HIS CONDITION PLEASE KEEP EYE ON HIM UNTIL I TAKE APPROPRIATE STEPS. And then I'd really have had something on you, right?" She glared at him.

"I don't see why. He *doesn't* know about my condition, whatever it's supposed to be, so an answer like that would have been perfectly reasonable. At least, it would have been if he didn't know me so well. Hangover, huh! And how do you know he would have answered so subtly if you had been correct in your ridiculous notion? He would probably have said I HAVE NO SON WHAT GOES ON THERE MISS O'REILLY and then where would we have been? Both of us?"

"Yes, but he didn't say that!" She stamped her foot helplessly on the soft carpet. "The cable that he did send was very carefully worded. He must have realized I was afraid of the wrong people reading it. I mean, he knows this is Cuba. He knows the Government controls everything, even the cable offices. So he sent a very clever reply."

"What're you so furious about, if it's so clever? No, Miss O'Reilly, honey. He took you absolutely literally and sent back a cable saying exactly what he meant. And it's not his fault, or mine, if it isn't what you wanted." He started chuckling again. "That's quite a message you sent him. Must have cost you a packet. How many words? Let's see. One two three-four-five-six-seven-eight-nine-ten-eleven-

"Oh, shuttup!" Her eyes glinted at him. "I don't care what you say, there's something I know—I know positively for a fact that I

son and you're not Lord Straven and *he knows* he told me he only had a daughter. Now why would he lie to me, then or now? If he's had one since that means you're three and a half years old!" She leaned forward and gave him a very penetrating look. "As a matter of fact, there's something pretty funny about his answer. Tell me, buster, did you intercept that cable?"

"For the love of Petel!" Nick sighed in genuine exasperation. "How could I? You know damn well I've been busy every minute of the day! I certainly wasn't hanging around lying in wait for your cables. Besides, it would take someone in G-2 to interfere with them."

She sank back glumly. "Yes, I suppose it would," she muttered. "You're not with G-2, are you?"

"Certainly not. And I wouldn't tell you if I were. Look, I've had a long day—I guess we both have—and I need some sleep. So will you kindly bugger off?" Under other circumstances he would have been only too glad to have her stay, but her presence was a little awkward and he did have a plane to catch.

Alison rose slowly, the picture of defeat. In spite of himself, and his doubts about her, he could not help wishing that they did not always have to argue. She was so very lovely, with that yellow-gold hair, that wonderful young shape, those eyes as blue as the deepest fjords of western Norway. . . .

"You can go to hell, you sonofabitch," she said crisply. . . . And a tongue like a wizened-up troll.

"If I can only go alone, I shall go in peace," he said. "Goodnight."

She stopped at the door and turned to him, one small hand on the knob. "And you can keep out of my room tonight, you crook. But you can look out for me tomorrow."

"Oh, I'll look out for you all right," he said with feeling.

When she was gone he placed a large chair firmly against the door and took the heavier of his two traveling bags out of the closet. It was a difficult tightrope he was walking now: Insisting that he was Straven, knowing that she knew he was not; knowing that she was up to something, but unable to cue her into telling him what it was without admitting that he himself had something up his sleeve. Damn nuisance, that girl. But such a lovely one!

He opened the bag and noted that Wilhelmina was still

in her secret bed. That reminded him—Softshoe, the man who'd followed him, no doubt on Carmela's orders. Why, though? He closed the bag temporarily and did what he should have done the moment Alison had left—searched the suite for signs of other callers. None. He secured all the windows, closed the curtains, and withdrew into his bedroom with the bag.

First, Softshoe's possessions. The only thing of interest was a card identifying him as Gustavo Palma, bar waiter at the Casa Del Jaguar. The rest was rubbish, including a set of dog-eared pictures so astonishingly revolting that Nick's eyebrows shot up into his hair and stayed there while he opened the bag's second secret compartment and took out Oscar Johnson, his link with the AXE world outside Cuba.

He thought for a moment before composing his radio message. Hawk would be expecting direct contact. But it was a little early in the morning for even that wiry old bird to be on the receiving end, and there were certain advantages in calling London. Red Turner—E-14 of AXE—would relay his messages swiftly and was also keeping in touch with Tommy Hansbury. Nick grinned fleetingly. Straven and Hansbury were being very cooperative indeed. "Oh, we'll back you up, old boy," Tommy had assured him. "Old Straven thinks you're up to some sort of international detective work and he'll back you to the hilt." Then he had turned to Red. "Anyway, if anything out of the way turns up, I'll call your friend here right away. I say, you chaps do lead exciting lives, don't you? You must tell me all about it when it's over." "Oh, I will," Nick had lied earnestly. By the time he saw Tommy again he would have invented something that would sound convincing.

Yes, Red would be the one to call. He would know about the cables.

Nick activated Oscar Johnson and went to work, using AXE's deceptively simple word code for the most part and numbers for places and other proper names. When Red decoded he would read:

AXE E-14 FROM N-3 CUBA. ITEM ONE SUSPECT
CARMELA ESTRELLA, OWNER-MANAGER OF
HAVANA CLUB DEL JAGUAR. TO BE STAB,
THOUGH NO PROOF YET OF TRAFFIC CON-
TACT. SHE OR ASSOCIATE SPANISH ORIGIN.

PORT-IMPORTER CARLOS RAMON YORTEGA MAY BE KINGPIN. CLAIM TO BE BUILDING LUXURY HOTEL IN SIERRA MAESTRAS THIRTY MILES OUTSIDE SANTIAGO BUT ARE HIGHLY SECRETIVE ABOUT IT AND ALLOW NO VISITORS. AM HEADING FOR MOUNTAINS VIA SANTIAGO LATER TODAY FOR PERSONAL INSPECTION. RELAY AT ONCE. ITEM TWO. THANK YOU ALL FOR GOOD WORK REGARDING CABLES. GIRL NOW COMPLETELY PUZZLED BUT STILL CLINGS TO ME LIKE LEECH, NOT ALTOGETHER UNPLEASANT SINCE SHE IS CURVY NATURAL BLONDE, FIVE FOOT FIVE, ODD MIXTURE OF CLUMSINESS AND GRACE, ACCENT A BLEND OF LONDON, BRONX AND WESTERN EUROPE. PLEASE SEE WHAT YOU CAN DIG UP ABOUT HER AND LET ME KNOW AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. ITEM THREE. ANY ORDERS FROM THE BIRDMAN? OVER.

He lit a cigarette and waited. Red would need a little time for decoding and drafting his reply. The night was gone already. Two hours sleep, a shower, breakfast, then the plane. And all of it without Alison, please God.

"Coming in, N-3 from E-14. Stand by N-3 for E-14."

Nick started transcribing busily.

When Red had finished he put Oscar back to bed and spent the next few minutes decoding.

NO INSTRUCTIONS HAWK AS YET. WILL RELAY YOURS IMMEDIATELY AFTER THIS CALL. OLD STRAVEN REMEMBERS YOUR LITTLE BLONDE WITH RELISH. MUCH AMUSED BY THE WHOLE THING BUT SWEARS HE NEVER LAID A HAND ON HER. REGRETS IT, TOO, I THINK. HAVE ALREADY INSTITUTED ENQUIRIES RE LADYFRIEND IN LIGHT OF CABLES. RESULTS NOT YET FINAL BUT AM VIRTUALLY CERTAIN THAT SHE IS—

Nick's mind and pencil flew. When he had deciphered what it was that Red was virtually certain about, he stopped. Re-read it. And grinned with pure delight. So that was what

she was! He'd thought so, and he'd hoped so, and how glad he was that it was true!

He picked up where he'd left off and discovered that:

SHE HAS VARIOUSLY GONE UNDER THE NAMES OF ALISON O'REILLY, BELLA NOVAK, MARY LOU JACKSON, ASTRID SORENSEN AND JEANNE LASALLE. WHERE SHE ORIGINALLY HAILS FROM AND HOW SHE MANAGES HER CHANGE OF IDENTITY ARE POINTS OF SOME INTEREST TO THE POLICE OF VARIOUS CONTINENTS. GOOD LUCK TO YOU, MY FRIEND. OVER.

Nick put Oscar Johnson back to bed and withdrew a small vial from the corner next to Wilhelmina. Then he took the vial, the top few pages of his message pad, and the remnants of Softshoe's possessions into the bathroom. The silvery liquid from the vial splattered onto the little pile. "Acid," Nick could hear Hawk saying in his school-room voice. "Highly volatile, with an increased effectiveness of better than seven hundred percent above the norm for such liquids. . . ." And it was effective. Paper, pictures, wallet and everything shriveled and disappeared within a few smokeless, hissing seconds. Nick surveyed Quantity K's swift work with satisfaction and washed the powder down the sink.

He exercised, showered, and then slept.

Nick looked at his watch and drained his third cup of coffee. He had found a café specializing in sumptuous breakfasts and for once he had managed to eat alone. Strangely enough, he felt as though something was missing.

He walked a few circuitous blocks before catching a cab for the airport. The one bag he was taking with him to Santiago had been sent ahead of him in care of one of the hotel porters.

The plane for Pinar del Rio was taking off on its short hop as he arrived. He bought a paper and stayed behind it until his own flight was called.

It was a gem of a day, bright with sunshine and the promise of success. He walked jauntily to the plane with a knot of people whom he was sure were Russian technicians

disguised as tourists. He himself was dressed in the hearty touring clothes befitting an English Lord and his camera was slung carelessly over his shoulder.

There were no seats assigned, so he could take his choice. He selected one near the door and made his long legs as comfortable as possible.

Passengers drifted aboard. Then hastened. Then scurried. Businessmen talked their way down to their seats. A group of solemn-looking students gathered in a huddle midway down the plane. A short man with square shoulders and big hands sat down two seats ahead of Nick.

And a little old lady in a veil stumbled uncertainly down the aisle.

WELCOME TO SANTIAGO

It was a short enough flight so that few people needed to stir any further from their seats than the magazine rack. The students were Americans, Nick noticed, and not so young as they had appeared on first glance. He wondered how they would fare when they got home from their unauthorized trip, and then it occurred to him that the student guise could be a useful cover for any outsider who wanted in. AXE might bear it in mind for the future. SIN and CLAW AXE's Communist counterparts, had probably thought of it already. Although they actually had no need to sneak in under cover. Their agents were in Cuba by the thousands either boldly in uniform or politely labeled "consultant," "technician," or "adviser."

A thought nibbled at Nick's brain. How many advisers and of what nationality, were needed to build a luxury hotel?

Nobody spilled anything on him. A couple of people passed by without looking at him and returned promptly to their seats. Someone was having an animated Russian conversation a few rows ahead and one or two of the

American students had managed to join in. Nobody, in fact, seemed to be doing anything at all that could interest a traveling spy known to his associates as Killmaster.

The steep hills of Santiago came up to meet them as the plane swooped low over the gateway to the Sierra Maestras. Then there was a glimpse of sky-blue water, a glitter of white sand, a runway, and a landing.

Nick was the first one off the plane. He managed it without unseemly haste, and with his usual cheerful smile for the stewardess. He was halfway across the tarmac before the first of the businessmen cleared the airstair.

It was the long legs and the deceptively casual stride that did it, and he used them to good advantage. Inside the arrival building he strode past the baggage counters, dodged behind a newsstand, and made a rapid if erratic beeline for the men's room.

There were better ways, maybe, of finding out if he was being followed. But at least this way he'd find out quickly, and by whom.

He stayed in the men's room, locked in a wash-and-brush-up cubicle, until he was sure that every last passenger on that moderately filled flight had collected his baggage and gone on his way. It was a pity that he couldn't emerge disguised as a Cuban militiaman or Russian engineer, but for a couple of good reasons he had to go on being Straven. For one thing, his cover was as solid as a rock (notwithstanding the interfering Alison), and if he was asked for proof of his identity he could produce it. For another, as an English businessman, and a noble one at that, he had more freedom of movement than practically any other visitor except maybe the man from Tass. At one point and one point only could he allow himself to adopt some other personality, and that would be when he positively could not be identified with Straven.

So, when he came out and looked around, he did so with the slightly vacuous look he had adopted for the use of Simon Straven. But his instincts were all correct and he had been right about the passengers and their baggage: the counter for CUBANA Flight 217 from Havana was empty of all but a single suitcase—his.

And it was being watched.

Memory flashed back to him the faces of every man and woman on that flight, except those who had been startled by

a veil or a down-turned hat brim. Even then he would have recognized by their clothing or their stance. He ambled casually over to the counter to collect his bag, noting everyone in sight. As far as he could see there were only two passengers left over from Flight 217, and he was one of them. The other was pretending not to notice him. Rather to his disappointment, it was not the little old lady with the heavy veil. It was a small and wiry man with disproportionately broad shoulders and big hands.

Nick surrendered his baggage check, picked up his bag, and headed outside for a cab. But it seemed that taxicabs were just as hard to find in Santiago as in Havana, so he settled for an airport limousine that looked like a transplanted British bus. It was almost empty and the driver was in no hurry to take off.

The bus filled gradually.

Big Hands took a seat up front just before the driver boarded. This time he was the first one to get off when the bus reached its downtown destination. Surprisingly, he strode over to the busy cab rank, tried to get a taxi, talked briefly to a baggage porter, then walked off with a shake of the head and a low growl of impatience.

Tricky, thought Nick. But maybe not quite tricky enough.

He waited in line for his turn at the cab rank. When it came he threw his own bag in the back seat, ignoring the porter's offer of help, and muttered "Hotel Comodoro," just loudly enough for both driver and porter to hear.

Unless the Comodoro had changed considerably since the old days, it was just exactly what he wanted.

He paid off the cab at the entrance of the hotel and walked in. To his relief, it had scarcely changed at all. There were steps leading up to the main lobby and, inside the lobby, stairs leading down to an arcade lined with barber shop, beauty parlor, bootblack cubbyhole, tobacconist, and various tiny specialty shops with gleaming windows and very little merchandise. He walked through the arcade and up the steps at the far end. After that it was a walk of less than four blocks to the Hotel San Vicente.

It was true, what they had told him in Havana—there was no need to book at any hotel these days. Turismo, ah! not what it used to be.

He registered as Lord Straven and picked up a few gaily colored folders describing the beauties of the nearby moun-

tains and the highly skilled guides who were available to take the visitor hunting, fishing, or simply sightseeing.

His room was one of the best that Santiago had to offer. The door opened with a resounding squeal, and the windows—offering a magnificent harbor view—were unblemished by such unsightly things as fire escapes. On the whole, he was quite pleased with his new surroundings. Nevertheless, he'd have to get on the road as soon as possible. Too many people seemed far too interested in the innocent Lord Straven.

He sat down and went over the folders. Here was a guide who specialized in fishing trips. Here was another who was an expert in the glorious history of the region. And there was a character who promised just about everything but a roll in bed, and maybe that too if you asked with the right amount of pesos. And here—ah. A car-hire service, genuine 1960 American cars, with driver or drive-it-yourself, by the day plus gasoline. Best bet, most likely; that, or something like it.

Next he checked his camera. Lenses, filters, flash equipment film; everything special, and everything in order. Last, a check of his standard armory: Wilhelmina the Luger, Hugo the stiletto, and Pierre the gas pellet, plus a supply of the small Pepitos for less deadly work.

His routine checking done, he allowed himself to think of the gnawing feeling in his midriff. His solitary breakfast had been good but it had worn off hours ago. He called room service and ordered up a huge tray of sandwiches and coffee. If the service was anything like that at the Nacional, he had time to burn. He stretched out on the bed and allowed himself to drowse.

The phone rang. Twenty minutes later, by his watch. He scooped it up and said "*¡Hola!*" Silence. "*¡Hola!*" he repeated irritably. More silence. Breathing. Then, hesitantly: "*Está—issa—iss that Lord Stravén?*" A man's voice, unmistakably Cuban. "*¿Que?*" said Nick. "*¿Que dice?*" The phone slammed down against his ear.

Goddamn. Sleep shot to hell, and someone onto him. Big Hands, maybe, already? Nick gave up all thought of sleep and sat down on the floor to immerse himself in his deep-breathing exercises. After a while he began to feel almost human and refreshed. By the time the knock sounded on the door he was ravenously hungry and itching to be off on his mountain trip.

There was a waiter outside with a service table. Nick, in undershirt and baggy British trousers, let him into the room, his shapeless hip pocket hiding a ready Wilhelmina.

"There, Señor!" the man said cheerfully. "I hope everything will be to your liking. Oh, yes—there is a packet underneath." He dipped down to the lower shelf of the wheeled table and withdrew a package. "This was waiting downstairs for you. They asked me to bring it up." He handed Nick a square package neatly wrapped in thick brown paper.

"Oh? Who asked you?"

"Head Porter, Señor." The man waited with his hand outstretched.

"That's very strange," said Nick. "I didn't tell anyone I'd be staying here."

The man shrugged. "But it has your name on it, no? It is very easy for anyone to telephone and find out. There are not many hotels these days in Santiago where an English Lord might be staying. You have friends you don't know about, Señor!"

Now what exactly did he mean by that? Nick eyed him coldly. But there was nothing odd about the man's manner; only a slight impatience at being obliged to stand there holding out a package.

"So it seems," Nick said, taking it reluctantly. He tipped the man and locked the door behind him.

Big Hands? Somehow he hadn't seemed the type to send unsolicited packages, legitimate or otherwise. Alison? Impossible. He shook his head. She was way back in Havana, no doubting gnashing her teeth with rage at his disappearance. Unless. . . . No, it couldn't be.

He took the package gingerly into the bathroom and filled the tub. It was standard procedure for dealing with anonymous gifts, so standard that surely everyone must know that everyone else knew it, too. The hoariness of the trick surprised him. If They thought Straven was worth following, then surely they would also give him credit for knowing this oldest of all dodges. Very curious, the whole bit. He frowned and dunked the parcel in the water. Maybe, somehow, it was Alison, sending him a little love token that would leap out of the package and black his eye when he opened it.

Nick left it soaking and got the Head Porter on the telephone.

"Ah, sí, your Lordship," the man said deferentially. "As

ou say, it came by hand, and only minutes before we sent it up. No, I regret I did not ask the bearer's name. There is no card in the parcel? Ah, a pity. The young man—not more than a boy, I think—looked like a student. Not a delivery boy, thought. Well-dressed, as if he were perhaps the son of one of your Lordship's friends. Was I mistaken, then?"

"Well, I don't know," said Nick. "Can't think who might have sent it." He thanked the man, rang off, and went back into the bathroom. Another few minutes, and the package should be well enough soaked to make it safe to ease off the paper.

He looked down at it thoughtfully. Funny, this. Now if he had resorted to this antiquated dodge of sending his enemy a lethal package, he would have been quite sure that the man would dunk it in water the moment it arrived. Unless, of course, the man was so innocent and unsuspecting that he'd rip it open without a second thought. Now maybe this was not a killer package sent to a suspected snoop, but a friendly warning to the man who'd leaped so promptly into Carmela's bed. On the other hand—Nick grinned to himself. If he did want to catch someone off guard and send a package that would blow up in his face, he'd try to devise the kind of package that would only blow up *after* it had been dunked in water. His grin spread. Man, that would be quite an ideal! He'd have to speak to AXE's Armory about it. So far as he knew, no one had thought about it before. Involuntarily, he backed a step or two away from the bathtub and its mysterious contents. Maybe someone had.

Then another thought struck him. Supposing it was a warning—what shape would the warning take? Two men had followed him already. They weren't playing this for laughs. They knew something about him, if only from his visit to the Casa Del Jaguar. If they wanted to send him a really chilling warning, or if they wanted to pull him into a trap, they would use . . . something of what they knew. His blood suddenly ran cold. It was a preposterous thought, as hackneyed and improbable as the package itself. But—what if it were a tiny souvenir of Carmela? Or more horrible still—of Alison?

The thought was such a grisly one that he could not shake it off. He stood there, feeling a growing urgency to find out what was in that neat brown paper parcel.

In spite of the warning bell inside his head, he reached down into the tub with Hugo poised to cut the string.

The telephone rang.

He stood motionless for a moment, cursing softly. No goddamn, it was probably one of Them again, wanting to know if he had opened up his little Welcome Wagon gift. So let them wonder why he didn't answer. He sliced swiftly at the cord. The telephone went on ringing.

On the other hand, he thought, I don't learn anything by ignoring it. Might as well pick the damn thing up and let them breathe at me. It could even be the Head Porter with some word about the package.

He straightened up and strode from the bathroom to the clangorous phone.

"Helloelloello!" he barked irritably, in a voice quite unlike his own. "His Lordship is in the bathroom, not to be disturbed. Who iss, pliss?"

A swift intake of breath. Then silence.

Nick scowled. "'Ellol Who iss this call—" He stopped abruptly. There was the strangest hissing sound from the bathroom, something like a gigantic pressure cooker or a steam pipe about to burst its seams. "What in hell!" he said in his own voice.

A blast of shattering sound and fury ripped through the room and shook it as if it were a cardboard house on the fringes of an earthquake. The bathroom door jolted from its hinges and slammed against the mirror, splintering it into infinitesimal fragments. Thick yellow smoke billowed into the bedroom and through it he could see bathroom fixture flying crazily as though caught and flung about by a miniature hurricane. A heavy picture detached itself from the wall near his bed and dropped with a heavy thud. The floor trembled convulsively beneath his feet.

He stared into the chaos, scarcely aware of the voice piping into his right ear, thanking whatever gods or saints protected him for getting him away from that wet package in the nick of time.

The telephone went on screeching at him.

"Simon! Simon! I know it's you! What in the hell is happening?"

Armando Maceo—as he called himself—prowled the dark rooms of the casino like an impatient cat, wondering what was going on upstairs.

That bitch! That fool of a bitch! If she had wanted a man

I had told him that I am promised to another—for bed as well as business."

"Then you should have frightened him away. I don't expect you to open up the bed I gave you to every passing stranger."

Carmela's lips curved dreamily. "He did not pass; he stayed. And he is no longer a stranger. I wanted him to make love to me and he did, beautifully. You look angry, Carlos; but you have no right to. Should I have simpered and said No, No, I belong to someone else; and then told him all about you? Of course not. I had a right to want him, and I took him, and all without saying a word about my lover Carlos. Was that wrong? But you must not be unfair." She reached out for him and trailed her fingers down his body. "You were the one who said we must keep our connection completely secret, always. You are the one who stays away from me until I starve. I would have been a fool to send that man away without enjoying him first. *I wanted him.* Besides, he is a Lord."

She took her hands away from him and looked at them as though expecting them to be suddenly and miraculously covered with bracelets and rings of gold and precious stones.

"Carmela, we have an arrangement. Have you forgotten what it is?" Carlos' dark eyes blazed down at her. A tiny muscle was twitching in his cheek. "I bought and paid for you, remember? But there was a mutual attraction, was there not? And our plan was to work together in secret until it was politic for us to come out into the open! I thought you understood that our personal relationship depended on your loyalty and discretion! I thought it was completely clear to you that we must not be seen together until the hotel was built! And that you were to keep your body as well as your tongue to yourself until *I* was ready to claim you." A dull, reddish tinge crept across his sharply-defined cheekbones, leaving the rest of his face drained and somehow yellowish. "Instead of that, you use secrecy as a stupid excuse for not sending the man away. God in Heaven! Couldn't you just have told him that you were chaste, that you didn't want him? What did that man promise you that you find so very fascinating?"

"Carlos!" She laughed out loud and rearranged her lovely legs. "I told you what I found fascinating. I told you that I wanted him. And I told you why. Oh, yes. I remember

all about our business arrangement." She stared up into his eyes. "This man made love, Carlos. Love! Do you remember what that is? It has nothing to do with business. Oh, he can offer me a better life than you, Carlos. With him I could have everything you offer—and his magnificent body as well. Ah, how we made love!" She stretched luxuriously. "No, the whole trouble is, Carlos—you stayed away too long!" Her long, dark lashes drooped dreamily over the deep green eyes and she sighed with remembered pleasure. "But it made what he did more marvelous than ever."

Carlos' slim body bent over hers. "And was his love so very marvelous!" he spat through lips that now stretched thinly over his clenched teeth. "Is he so much better than I?" His hand slashed down suddenly at Carmela's face.

Her head rocked backward with the sudden violence of the attack. Her smile was no more than a baring of her teeth.

"Yes, he is—much better!" she screamed. "Much better!" She drew her hand back to strike at his face but he caught her wrist and bent it back.

"Carmela, I want you," he said hoarsely. "It is a long time for me, too. But you have wronged me. Goddamn you, Carmela!" He twisted her arm back until she screamed with pain and bit him savagely in the wrist. His slender but powerful body seemed to twist with sudden fury and in one swift movement he had her naked on the couch beneath him. Without bothering to do more than lower his elegant trousers he attacked her violently, bruising her with his clawing fingers and thrusting as if his body were a murderous weapon. Carmela swore and writhed, jabbing vainly at his face with her long fingernails. He shoved her hands aside and bent assiduously to his work. She fought silently . . . and then her legs coiled slowly around his.

When it was over they were both gasping like stranded fish.

"You—you are mine, Carmela. Remember that."

She smiled a slow and secret smile. "You are cruel, Carlos. First you neglect me, then you attack me like a beast. Is that the love you think I want?"

"But you liked it, didn't you? Don't pretend you didn't like it!"

She nodded, almost unwillingly. "Ten times a month is not enough."

He sighed and put his clothes back where they belonged

by the package. If that man were all he claims to be, he would be dead by now."

Carlos laughed grimly. "Like the witches who were drowned because they did not truly have the witchcraft that would keep them floating! But no matter. We will kill him yet. Our Strangler followed him well. Call Santiago again and put him back on the job. Let him do it his own way. I do not want that man leaving Santiago—unless he leaves there in a coffin."

THE MAD STUMBLER STRIKES AGAIN

"Alison, for the luvva Pete, will you get off the line? Yes, I'm all right—the hotel's blowing up, that's all. No, I don't know where you are and I don't care. But if you know what's good for you, you'll stay away from me. *Stay away from me*, do you understand?"

Then, Nick recalled later as he strode moodily down the darkening street away from Police Headquarters, he had slammed down the phone without even thanking her for saving his life and gone to answer the thundering on his bedroom door. After that there was nothing he could do but tell his story to the police like a puzzled, frightened English lord.

It had been a long session, there and at the station—so long that he knew they must be contacting London to check on his identity. No, he had no idea who might want to kill him. Yes, it had been a most horrifying surprise. Well, he supposed that in the business world one sometimes made enemies without even knowing who they were. No, he had no idea who they might possibly be.

The Cuban police had been surprisingly courteous. So courteous that, when they had at last concluded their interrogation, they had suggested that he move to another hotel and use another name until the mystery was solved. Hawke? Yes, that would be all right. Immediately

plainclothesman was sent around to the Comodoro with his bag and instructions to reception to expect a Mr. Thomas Hawke. Mr. Hawke himself would stroll around a few minutes later and slip in quietly. He did not want an escort?

No, indeed!

It was hell's own nuisance, getting involved with the police. But short of making Straven disappear immediately and permanently, that was all he could do. With their tremendous courtesy, they had not searched his person, so Wilhelmina still snuggled safely in her bed at his waistband. But they might just take it into their heads to have their Havana counterparts take a look at the bag Lord Straven had left—ingeniously locked, but still vulnerable—in the baggage room of the Nacional. Oscar Johnson would be discovered if they ripped the bag apart, and they might just possibly do that. It was not a cheering thought.

He walked briskly down the street, ears and eyes alert for the slightest sign of anything untoward. But the old town was peace itself and his own sixth sense seemed to be resting quietly between bouts.

A faint uneasiness stirred within him as he entered the hotel and crossed the lobby. It didn't come from the clerk or the management; they were kindness itself, and very discreet.

"Your key, Señor. And your bag is upstairs in your room."

That reminded him—his shaving kit had gone up with the bathroom. Maybe he would be able to replace it in the shopping arcade. He thanked the clerk and strolled across the lobby for the stairs leading down to the tiny shops on the lower level. This time he was positive that someone was watching him, but he could not trace the feeling to its source. He made himself walk on. He wasn't in this business to avoid trouble but to find out where and what it was. And crush it.

He walked down the first short flight of steps with the feeling that something was going to happen very soon, and that it may as well happen right now because there wasn't any use postponing it. When he made the sharp right-angled turn on the stairway to take the last few steps down into the arcade he knew that this was it. The arcade shops were closed. Only a dim light lit the passage between the tiny stores. No one was down there to see whatever might happen to him. Except the man who trod so close behind him.

Nick suddenly crouched low and leaped the last few re-

maining steps, half-turning in his flight so that he could see and meet the corner of the soft footsteps. But the other man moved almost as quickly, and because he was above and did not have to turn his head he had the edge on Nick. He seemed to fly, and his flight made a swishing sound that ended in a blinding thud of pain against Nick's head.

For a moment he saw stars and blackness, and his head was a carousel revolving madly in a night filled with pain and disjointed sounds. Then his mind cleared slightly, enough to let him see the distorted face that snarled down into his and feel the pain of a pair of huge hands mercilessly squeezing his neck. The blackness came again and turned into a swirling mist. Nick clawed savagely at the wavering figure above him. The eyes, the eyes! his mind screamed at him. He jabbed at the eyes and they seemed to fall apart. But still the pressure tightened at his throat. The ribs, then! his mind said urgently. A gut grab at the ribs and then a quick strike at the wrists! But the darkness was too thick and the viciously strong fingers ground relentlessly against his wind-pipe. His body whiplashed like a dying snake's.

While he struggled helplessly and slowly died he cursed himself silently and incoherently in some dim recess of his mind. Slow slow slow you fool why were you so slow you let him get you! His spy's mind berated him. His mouth made wordless gagging sounds and sometimes his feebly darting hands found something that gave way mushily and whimpered. But the pressure kept on building and the blackness slowly turned to red.

And then the bomb went off again. At least, that's what it sounded like. The lid blew off his head and there was the loud clatter of something falling heavily and something slammed against him. Miraculously, the pressure left his throat. But the weight stayed on his body. Somehow it seemed much heavier than before. The red turned back to black and the blackness let in little swirls of light. As in a dream he heard a distant voice squealing—"Oh, get up, please get up! Oh, God, I fell down those bloody stairs—I didn't mean to hurt you!" Part of the weight lifted and the dim lights of the arcade swam back into focus.

The man with the big hands was lying across Nick's body, strangely silent. And a little old lady in a thick black veil was staggering to her feet, one oddly chic Parisian-style shoe

parted from her foot and lying close to the would-be strangler's head. . . .

She froze into a standing crouch and stared at Nick.

"You!" she said. "It's you!"

Nick stared back and pushed the weight away from him. The chunky body rolled off with a sighing thump.

"You!" he said. "Alison! Alison, I love you, baby!"

His room was on the seventh floor; hers was on the third. Somehow between the two of them they guided a man with a severe headache and glazed eyes through the lobby and up the stairway to her room. The sense of being watched was gone. No one, Nick was certain, knew that a Luger by the name of Wilhelmina was ready to shoot first and answer questions later if the man with the strangler's hands made the slightest uncalled-for move. But Big Hands was too dazed to know what was going on. Carter himself felt that he had seen better days, but at least he could walk straight and hold a gun.

Once inside her room they locked the door and barricaded it with chairs. Nick swung Wilhelmina in a neat arc through the air and brought her butt down just above Big Hands' right ear. The man's glazed eyes rolled and closed. He dropped.

"I take it he's not a friend of yours," Alison observed. "Now suppose you tell me—"

"Later," Nick cut in. "First of all you're going to check the windows and make sure no one's going to sneak in on us. Then help me find something to tie him up with."

She muttered angrily but did as she was told. Nick swiftly went through Big Hands' pockets. In addition to the usual assortment of money and keys and odd bits of paper he found an unused airline ticket to Pinar del Rio. Hmm. This meant Carmela had either sent him after Nick herself or had told someone else where she thought her new lover might be headed. Nick frowned. And so this man had been prepared to take the Pinar del Rio flight until he saw Lord Straven going somewhere else. It looked bad for Carmela—for Carmela "Star."

When Big Hands was tied securely to a straight-backed chair Nick turned to Alison. "Do you have such a thing as a drink in the house—oh. Thanks very much; that was quick." He took the double shot she poured him from a leather-

bound flask and drank gratefully. "Good girl. Good girl twice today. But do you mind telling me how you knew I was staying here? I haven't even moved in yet."

"I didn't know." She perched on the edge of the bed and sipped her own drink. "I tracked you as far as the San Vicente, and then you blew up or something. *I'm* the one who's staying here. I had rather a busy afternoon trying to find out what had happened to you, and when I got back here I remembered I'd forgotten to bring my toothbrush. So I went down to the arcade. I thought the shops might still be open. And then it was a little darker than I thought it might be, and my foot slipped or something, and all of a sudden I smashed into you two—"

"You mean you didn't see us? It really was an accident?" Nick put his glass down with a tiny thud.

Alison looked at him coldly. "Of course it was. I just slipped, I told you. These things happen to me now and then."

He grinned at her with pure delight. "They do, don't they? But your timing's so much better than it was at first. If it weren't for you they'd be scraping me off the walls by now. Incidentally, do you have anything to wear besides those funereal weeds—"

"Sure, but let's not talk about my wardrobe. What was that hellish sound—what goes on around here, anyway, and who's this fella?" She jerked a dainty thumb at Big Hands, her face registering distaste.

"I'll tell you in a minute. I suppose I owe it to you." Nick drained his glass and handed it to her. "More, please. That was a bomb exploding in the bathroom, and our friend here followed me from Havana. I don't know why we didn't all three sit together in the plane—it would have saved us all so much time and trouble. Just tell me first: How did you know in the first place that I was leaving Havana?"

Alison gave him back his glass, recharged. Her flawless lips curved into the world's most delightful, dimpling smile.

"Sympathetic Hall Porter," she said. "Who else? Cheers!" They raised their glasses high, and drank.

"All right now, give!" she demanded.

Nick told her all he could. Strangler still slept peacefully in his straight-backed chair, unaware of life and all its little problems.

"I don't get it," Alison said. "Why do all these people want

to follow you and kill you? It can't be just because the over-ripe Carmela wants your scalp to dangle at her waist. I've heard of perversion, but *that* is ridiculous."

Nick looked at her speculatively. Yes, he decided; she deserved to know a little more. Anyway, she could be useful.

"I'm after a murderer," he said. "The killer of a returning refugee named José Cabrera. It seems he knew he had some enemies here and was trying to find sanctuary in the Sierra Maestras. But he didn't make it. They got him. Before he died he left a one-word message—the word 'Star.' I'm trying to find Star. And that's all I'm going to tell you."

The look she was giving him was even more speculative than his. Strange expressions chased each other across her mobile face. "You mean that Star is really not some sort of precious stone?" she blurted.

"No. I don't think so. But I'm still not sure what it is."

"And you mean that you—you're a detective. You've got something to do with Interpol!"

"No, I certainly haven't." Nick laughed silently inside himself. Little Alison was nervous. "I do some investigative work, that's true, but only when it's in the direct interests of my company."

"But how can the death of a refugee affect the interests of a tobacco company—and you're not going to persist in this ridiculous fiction of being Lord Simon Straven?"

"Oh, it's not as ridiculous as you think, nor so fictitious," he said ambiguously. "Anyway, the police told me to change my name. I'm now Mr. Thomas Hawke, in case you want to phone me up some time."

She looked completely baffled and finished her drink in one long, breathless gulp.

Nick looked from her to the man with the Big Hands. It was time to do something about both of them.

"Look, Alison," he said. "Do you think you can bear to stay alone with him for a few minutes? I want to get something from my room—also make sure that everything's all right up there."

"Oh, sure." She glanced scornfully at the Strangler. "As long as those big hands are out of action, I'll be fine. Anyway, I have my .22." She pulled it out of her bag and held it firmly in one small, slender-fingered hand.

"Fine. I'll be about ten minutes. When I come back I'll rap four longs and three shorts. Don't let anyone else in,

don't accept any packages, and don't answer the phone."

"Okayokayokay, so go." He was struck again by the sudden variations in her accent, but now at least he knew the reason for it. On impulse, he reached lightly for her and brushed a kiss across a satin-soft cheek. She did not draw back.

He walked lightly over to the door and pulled the chair aside. "Lock up after me," he ordered, and stepped cautiously into the hall. There was no one about. He heard the door locking behind him and glided swiftly to the stairway, climbing it in long-legged strides that took him quickly to the seventh floor.

Once in his room he made a lightning check of windows, doors, locks, closets and other hiding places. Satisfied, he went through his single suitcase, and found to his relief that everything was as it should be. His camera equipment and one or two other things he had unpacked—except for his toilet kit—had been replaced in his bag. Everything was present and correct. He took the little vial of Quantity K out of its hiding place and thrust it in his pocket, glancing at his watch. Four and a half minutes since leaving Alison's room : . . not bad.

Nick locked his own door and raced lightly back to the third floor. For a moment he stood listening outside Alison's room, testing her out for one last time before trusting her completely. Or as completely as one could trust a woman who was known to be a—

A slight sound came from within the room. The creaking of a wooden chair; a little thump. A guttural voice, words indistinguishable.

Alison's voice replying, words faint but distinct as a bell.

"I'll wash your mouth out with soap if I hear any more of that," she said.

Again, the guttural voice.

The answer. "Are you out of your mind? I'll cut your balls off before I cut you loose."

Nick grinned to himself. If ever a mouth needed washing out with soap, it was Alison's. He tapped lightly on the door—four longs, three shorts.

"Who is it?" she called.

"Tommy Hawke," he answered.

The door opened at once. "Thought I'd better ask in case someone else thought of the same signal," she said calmly.

She had taken the veil off, and her glowing hair shone like spun gold under the bright ceiling lights. "Good thing you came quickly. I think your friend is ready to talk."

"I hope he is." Nick closed the door. "The readier he is, the less painful this is going to be." Big Hands was squirming in the chair, his dingy, pock-marked face twisted into a malevolent scowl. Nick eyed him with distaste. "So you speak English, friend?" he said. The eyes and lips both narrowed stubbornly. "Spanish, then? Portuguese, French, Russian, Chinese, Urdu?" He tried Spanish first. "Did Carmela send you to kill me, *amigo*?"

The man's lips curled into a sneer. When he was finished sneering he spat juicily onto the floor.

Nick sighed. Forcing information from reluctant lips was not his favorite occupation.

"Alison. Take a walk. Go up to my room if you like, or go outside for a while. This won't take long. Twenty minutes or so."

Alison sucked in her breath. Suddenly the laughing-eyed man who called himself Lord Straven was a hard-faced stranger. "You won't—" she began, and swallowed nervously.

"No more than I have to," Nick said expressionlessly.

"I'll walk around the block a few times," she said. "Four longs, three shorts when I come back." She drew the heavy veils over her head and face and let her shoulders droop. Suddenly, she was a shriveled-up old lady, walking with an unsure and tottering step. "But please don't hurt—"

"That's up to him. Don't walk too far, now. It isn't good for you at your age. And be careful, will you? Just in case someone decided to follow you."

She gave him a beady-eyed and wary look. "I think perhaps I'll just go sit in the lobby for a while," she quavered, "and watch the young folk passing by."

He grinned briefly and hurried her along her way.

"Now," he said to Big Hands, who was looking both bemused and sullen at once, "we will talk man to man." He strolled over to Big Hands and stood before him. "I want you to answer my questions quietly and quickly. You may feel impelled to scream. If you do . . . you will be silenced." Hugo shot into Nick's hand. The icepick blade flicked out of its narrow sheath and hovered in the air an inch away from

the fleshy nose. "But it will be much better if you talk at once, without screaming."

The man looked up at him. Again the sneer. Then the guttural voice.

"What will make me scream? That toy? I have had many pinpricks in my life."

"Ah, so you do speak English. That will make things easier. No, I will save the knife for killing." Nick put Hugo down on the bedside table. "I have something else I shall use as a persuader if you make it necessary." He reached into his pocket and took out the tiny vial. "But let me tell you first that it will be much easier if you answer a few simple questions without making me persuade you. I want to know who sent you. I want to know why. I want to know exactly what your orders were. I want to know how a man named Cabrera, a Cuban refugee, came to be murdered on his boat. I want to know about the new hotel in the Sierra Maestras. In short I want to know everything you can tell me. And I don't want to have to squeeze the answers out of you one by one."

He took the stopper off the tiny vial. The man with the strangler's hands watched curiously, the sneer still twisting his lips but the dull eyes narrowing with apprehension.

Nick pulled the drawer out of the bedside table. "Look," he said, flourishing it in front of Big Hands. "Well-made, isn't it? No cracks, no holes, no secret pockets. Watch." Carefully, very carefully, he tipped a tiny drop of Quantity K onto the wooden bottom of the drawer and held it up for Big Hands to admire. The little droplet trickled down the inclined board, leaving a snail-like trail behind it. Then it disappeared. But the trail deepened into a widening track and the track became a winding gully. Big Hands watched, fascinated, as the gully became a quickly growing, ragged-edged hole in the bottom of the drawer. "There, now," said Nick, holding it up so that Big Hands could be sure to see the daylight showing through it. "You see what the stuff can do to wood. Perhaps that gives you an idea what it can do to human flesh." He slid the drawer back in place and turned to Big Hands. His eyes were chips of ice. "I suggest that you start talking."

The Strangler stared at the vial as if hypnotized. "You wouldn't use that on me. It is all a mistake. I don't know about any of these things you talk about. It was an accident

that woman hit me down there, I just fell against you. You can't do this to me!" His voice rose to a shriek as the vial hovered over his leg. Hugo jabbed viciously into the leathery throat.

"I told you to talk quietly," Nick said conversationally. "But especially I told you to talk. Not lie, just talk! And don't kid yourself—I *will* use this on you. You lie; I'll use it. You scream; I'll use the knife. Get it? We'll alternate. Get a little variety into the act. Now—*will—you—talk?*" His voice was suddenly as icy as his eyes.

"No! There is nothing to talk about!" Big Hands was shaking all over, making the straight-backed chair shiver as if he were balancing in it on a tightrope and about to plunge terrifyingly into space. "Don't do that to me—that is not human—I am only a—" His mouth clamped shut suddenly as if he had caught himself in the act of telling the truth.

"Only a what?" Nick let the vial tip gradually so that it hung inches above Big Hands' left knee. "Tell me, sweetheart. I'm waiting."

The mouth stayed shut, a whitening tight line across the swarthy face. Beads of sweat sprang out on the forehead.

"It hurts, friend. Horribly . . . for a long, long time. And I'm still waiting." Nick tilted the vial over the fabric-covered knee.

The eyes closed tightly and snapped open again quickly to fix on the little vial, as though they could not bear to either look at it or shut it out. But the colorless mouth stayed closed.

"All right." Nick sighed resignedly and lowered the mouth of the vial the fraction of an inch it needed to spill an infinitesimal drop on the trousered knee. Big Hands saw it coming and jerked his leg galvanically, his mouth open now and his teeth bared in a yellow snarl. But the silvery liquid moved faster and sank its savage bite straight and deep into its fleshy target, eating through the cloth like smokeless fire and searing into the knotted flesh with driblets as inexorably, excruciatingly painful as the striking fangs of a hundred venomous snakes.

The man with the big hands leapt convulsively, slamming his bound arms down to rub against the burning knee in a vain attempt to eradicate the awful agony. His neck corded as the strangled sounds bubbled to his lips.

"Carefull" Nick rapped. Hugo flicked once in front of the

tortured face. "I warned you—one scream and you're dead. Don't have much choice, do you? Suffer in silence; talk quietly; or die." He watched the throat bobble as the rising scream died down. "Good," he said. "Now shall we try that one more time?"

This time he raised the vial high so that it tilted down over the thick nose. Slowly, slowly, slowly, he began the pouring motion.

Big Hands shook his head wildly from side to side. "No, no, no!" he whimpered. "No!"

"Talk?"

"No!"

The tiniest of corrosive dribblets flecked his nose.

Big Hands screamed.

Nick slammed a hand against his mouth. Carefully, he put the vial on the table. Slowly, menacingly, he raised the icepick blade of the stiletto. The throttled scream became a strangled moan. Lips moved against Nick's hand. Big Hands gave a muffled groan, repeated it, wagged his head desperately. "Enough, enough, enough," he muttered agonizedly.

Nick took his hand away. "I'm listening."

Eyes watering, body trembling, Big Hands told his story. It came out in painful little jerks; but out it came.

"It was Maceo—Armando Maceo—at the Jaguar. He—he gets his orders from Ortega. I—don't know anything about a hotel—Aaahhh! Don't do it again!"

Nick prodded and listened.

When the man was finished and the sweat was rolling down the swarthy face, Nick knew that Spanish cigar importer Carlos Ramon Y'Ortega had ordered his death and that of the man Nick knew as Trainor. That Trainor had found the building site in the mountains, run, escaped, been caught and killed. That it was not a hotel at all, but Big Hands did not know what it was—Aaaahhh! As God was his judge, he did not know what it was! That Big Hands had been called off Nick's trail by Ortega's "office" in Santiago and put back on it when the bomb had failed to do its work. That Ortega traveled widely on missions that Big Hands knew nothing of, and that he was not often in Havana, Santiago, or even at the mountain site. But when he had instructions to communicate he always prefaced them with the code phrase—*Orders from Star.*

Carmela Estrella? Star?

Big Hands managed a mutilated laugh. That street bitch! Armando had told him what she really was! Ah, no. Clever Carlos had used her name as a convenience, because he did not want his own name bandied about even in secret communications.

Clever Carlos! Nick shook his head unbelievably. So he had even used her name. And it had led right back to him. . . .

There was a hammering at the door. Four shorts, three longs—and an extra little tap.

Alison's voice, quavering plaintively. "It's your mother, dearie. With a friend!"

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

A friend.

He had no friends. Hers? Doubt flickered in him once again.

But she had warned him.

"Just a minute," he called. Big Hands was looking up at him with a new glint of hope and interest in his eyes. Nick brought the hard edge of his palm down against the sweating neck and wiped off the expression. The man who had been sent to strangle him slumped sideways in the chair as far as the tight bonds would allow him. Nick picked him up, chair and all, and carried him into the bathroom.

The rapping on the door sounded again. The signal, plus that extra little knock.

"Coming!" he said impatiently. Wilhelmina slid into his hand. He opened the door and stepped quickly to one side.

Alison burst in with unbecoming haste, her veils awry and her eyes bright with alarm. A slender young man, hardly more than a boy, followed close behind her. Much too close for comfort. One of Alison's arms was twisted painfully behind her back, and he was holding it so close to him that their bodies touched. She shot one frantic look at Nick

and tried to pull away. "He's got a gun!" she gasped. The young man grinned and gave her arm a vicious twist. His leg shot out and slammed the door shut and his free hand appeared over Alison's shoulder. In it, Nick saw, was a small but deadly looking gun with a familiar protuberance on the snout. A silencer.

"You will drop that gun," the boy said pleasantly, "or the Señorita will be badly hurt." He smiled. Only his handsome head and the efficient, silent gun showed behind his living shield. But Alison's body gave a little jerk and her half-veiled face twisted with pain and rage.

Nick dropped Wilhelmina. Dropped her suddenly, in the middle of the boy's smile and his own lightning grab for the slim young arm that aimed the gun at him over Alison's shoulder. He caught the arm, ducked swiftly, and pulled. For a fleeting second the three of them seemed to cling together in some weird triangular dance of perverted love. Then the young male body, slim and graceful, sailed through the air over Nick's shoulder and landed with an ungainly thump while Alison whirled around with a little squeal and collapsed, quite daintily for a welcome change, upon the carpeted floor.

Nick's coiled body uncoiled in midair and spun around to land one fiendish stomp kick against the young man's head. The fellow groaned, rolled over groggily, and reached up with surprising speed to pull Nick down to him and thrust a sword-blade of a hand into Nick's face. Nick snatched at the hand before it reached its mark and slammed the ball of his palm under and up against the youthful chin. The head snapped back and a gargling sound came from the throat. But the young body still writhed and twisted vigorously, the hands seeking out the vulnerable places on Nick's body and jabbing painfully. The face beneath Nick was no longer quite so young as it had first appeared to be. Lines of strain and pain formed around the eyes and mouth; breath came heavily and cords knotted in the neck. He was not, Nick saw, the graceful youngster he had seemed, but a man of whip-cord strength whose youthful façade had been torn away to reveal deep lines of hatred and evil that had taken shape over the course of many years. He was still not old; twenty-five, perhaps twenty-eight, but he was forever unmasked as "the son, perhaps, of your Lordship's friend;" he was an aging killer, bred to his evil task.

Killmaster had met such men before. He killed them when he could, and when he had to.

He killed now.

He pinned the flailing body face downward to the floor and cupped his hands beneath the chin, below the snapping, snarling mouth. His knees pressed down. His arms jerked upward. There was a snap.

The body slumped.

Nick sighed and stood up slowly. He turned to Alison. She stared at him. Looked down at the broken body. Back at Nick. Her eyes were dull.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly. "I should have known something like this would happen. But I didn't want it to."

Nick waited.

"He was at the desk," she said. "Asking if Lord Straven was registered. They told him no. I thought you might be interested. I thought you'd want to talk to him. So I—I said I'd lead him to you. It was going to be so simple. He looked like such a kid. I jabbed my gun into him. It was very easy. But—but when we got outside he took it from me. Like—taking candy from a baby. And then he put his own gun in my back. I'm sorry. I am so sorry. I—" she stopped. Great globules of tears welled from her eyes and trickled down her cheeks. She began again. "You killed him. Did you have to kill him?"

Nick stared back at her, wondering why it felt so bad to be told he was a killer when he had killed so many men before and no one had ever seemed to give a single, solitary damn.

"I'm sorry, too," he said. "I should have let him kill me, instead."

She gave a little sob and reached out her arms imploringly.

He reached out his own arms and held her very close. They murmured to each other, and they kissed.

After a while he drew away from her and said—"Gather up your things and let's get out of here. We'll go to my room while we decide what to do next. Wait—I'll get whatever's in the bathroom."

She caught her breath. "That other one. Is he—?"

"He's fine," Nick said firmly. "Just pack your bag and never mind what I'm doing. Unless, of course, you want to wait outside."

"No!" she snapped, eyes bright but chin jutting out determinedly.

"All right. So pack."

The room on the third floor was silent as the grave. There was someone in the bathroom, but he was gagged and stifling the sound sleep of the unjust one who has been exposed and slugged. There was someone in the closet, but he was fast asleep. There was a sign on the front door, and it said, Do Not Disturb. And Alison had done something to the lock that made it very hard to open.

The room on the seventh floor was alive with soft, vivacious sounds. Alison had hidden herself when the waiter came up with the laden tray, and now Mr. Thomas Brown and friend were eating. Also drinking.

"Tomorrow," Nick was saying. "If you can't find a car tagging along, I'd like you to hire a car. A nice, new-looking sedan. I'll do the same myself. I'll go to the map and show you where we'll meet. We'll meet at the Hands along."

Alison raised her eyebrows. "What for?"

"As guide," said Nick. "We're going to the old thing. Do you have a change of clothes? I'll give you a real change, so you don't look like the old bag, my mother."

Sorensen or Bella Novak or Jeanne LaSalle or something else? Don't get me wrong. I don't really care. I'm just curious, that's all." He gave her his most captivating grin and watched the pupils of her eyes inflate like blue balloons. She stared at him.

"You go on calling me Alison," she said finally, "the way I call you Simon. The name doesn't matter very much. But there's a difference between you and me."

"I'll say there is," he agreed fervently.

"And the difference is," she went on evenly, "that I've been honest with you. I took you for one of my own kind and I wanted to join up. I thought you were onto something and I wanted in. Did I ever give you any other impression? But you; no, you couldn't come clean with me. Not even now. There're only two kinds of people in the world who could get the kind of information about me that you just came out with—conmen, crooks who know the international scene, and cops." She looked him coolly in the eye. "You know which I am. Which are you?"

"You're wrong," Nick said seriously. "There are plenty of other people who can easily get that kind of information. I've told you, and it's true—I'm neither cop nor conman. I'm here because I have a job to do."

"Oh, I'm sure of *that*. It's just the nature of the job that puzzles me."

"Then it will have to go on puzzling you," Nick said gently. "I can't make it any clearer than I already have."

They stared at each other in silence for a moment. Tension built uncomfortably between them.

Nick pushed back his chair. "You're right," he said. "I'm not being fair to you. Forget about the car tomorrow. Forget everything, if you can. You've already helped me more than I deserve. You take my room tonight—lock it carefully, though—and I'll go down to yours and do something about our two visitors. That has to be done, anyway. Thank you for everything you've done." He leaned over her and kissed her lightly on the forehead.

"You don't trust me!" she said angrily. "I suppose you think I'll blow it, whatever it is. Goddamn it, you don't know how humiliating it is to be an unsuccessful international jewel thief! But you don't have to rub it in. You said I've helped so far. Well, I can help again, can't I? You think I

can't be trusted, don't you? You think I'll louse up something at the crucial moment?"

"I don't think that at all! It isn't that, Alison—I've just realized that I've asked too much of you. It's dangerous, don't you understand?" She went on babbling—"Just want to get rid of me, that's what you want—I suppose I've been a nuisance but—"

"Alison!" Nick shook her shoulders. "Believe me! You're in danger if you stay with me, and I've been fool enough to get you deep in trouble. I want you to go for your own sake—"

She was sobbing now, and the tears rolled down her cheeks. And still the words of self-blame came bubbling out.

There was only one way to shut her up.

He kissed her. Long, hard, and lovingly. Strong, brown hands smoothed back the tousled blonde hair and wiped the tears away from satin-soft cheeks. She snuffled quietly and shook her head to draw away from him. But he went on kissing, and as he kissed her he enjoyed it more and more. After a very little while her head stopped shaking and her lips returned his kiss with growing warmth. When he drew away she was no longer crying and there was a small light glowing in her eyes.

"I'm an ass," she said, in her normal voice. "I'm sorry to be such a whining mess. But the thing is, you see, I don't want to go. Simon, cop or conman, I don't care what you are, please kiss me again."

She reached for him this time and met his mouth with parted lips.

After that it was the most natural and inevitable and essential thing in the world that they should make their way slowly toward the bed, nibbling a little, kissing a lot, murmuring like lovers after their first frightening but delicious quarrel, stroking each other's fully-clad body and making little motions to remove unnecessary restrictions.

They passed a light switch. Flicked it off. Passed a lamp. Flicked that off, too. Kissed and murmured . . . "Want to stay with you. . . . It's only that I'm worried, baby, honey . . ." Clothes flicked off, too.

And then they were in bed.

A wave of deep contentment washed over Nick as he held her warm, soft form close within his arms. Her name might not be her own, but everything else about her was

completely genuine—the firm, full mounds that bobbed just barely perceptibly when she walked; the flat, trim belly that did not need a girdle; the superbly rounded thighs that glided smoothly when her body moved; the gentle strength of her exquisite young limbs—it was all real, and there was even more of it when the concealing clothing had been peeled away.

He found all this out very quickly, enjoying his discoveries as if they were something new to him. Her breast for instance—smooth, soft, warm—no, not so soft—jutting out suddenly as if in triumph or appreciation of his touch. And here another, expanding and thrusting itself inquisitively against him. And this soft valley between the two rising peaks; here, a curving plain that was made for lying upon; and here, another valley, even softer and more enticing than the first. . . .

She was making discoveries, too, and murmuring her enjoyment of them. His body, like hers, felt both relaxed and tensed at once, and full to bursting with the intense pleasure of present excitement and tingling anticipation of a wonderfully explosive future.

He caressed her, at first, as if she were a cuddly kitten, and she purred happily at his touch. Like a kitten, too, she rubbed herself cosily against him, stretching out and curling up into comfortable kitten shapes. Delightfully, she was a little ticklish, but not so much that he was forced to stop his stroking explorations. Once, when she gave a throaty little chuckle and a tiny shiver, he drew his hand away, but she reached for it with slender fingers and put it back where she told him it belonged.

Slowly, as they lay together, the kitten became a voluptuous cat; and then the cat turned back into a lovely, feline woman who wanted to give all her love and be loved fully in return. Nick felt his waiting, half-relaxed muscles grow taut and eager. The little sparks shooting fire through his veins were spreading now, feathering out like a hot, excited trembling that racked his whole body and leaped to hers. He twined himself around her and let her feel his growing urgency; just feel it, not yet put out the fire before it reached full blaze. Her supple body responded with a flexible little twist that made them both moan with pleasure. It was ecstasy; but it was not the super-sophisticated kind of love-making that demands variations to make it interesting.

He knew the tricks of love—the wide variety of curious positions, the sensual little gimmicks to titillate and tantalize, the maneuvers and attacks that could prod passion to the point of no return—but he also knew that now he had no need of them. Instinct told him that she would be repelled rather than gratified, and that she wanted to give herself in her own uncomplicated yet wholly satisfying way. There was no trickery about Alison—not, at least, in bed—none of the carefully learned and calculated loveplay he had encountered on various other journeys on behalf of AXE. This one was not for AXE; this one was for Carter, and for her.

He kissed the softness of her sweet-smelling body and felt the mutual warmth grow warmer.

She made love simply and unashamedly, pretending neither that she was new to this sort of thing nor that it was as commonplace to her as her morning cup of coffee and a cigarette. Woman's instinct made her an adept in the art of love, the kind of love that needed no extra stimulus to spark it into life. The eager but gentle way she moved and the little things she whispered told him, as he came to know her and sense what she was feeling, that she made love only when she truly wanted to and when it mattered to her. And so it came to matter to him, very much, that she be happy.

She was velvet-soft all over, taut young muscle underneath. The muscles tightened gradually and she sighed into Nick's ear. Her arms encircled him and her thighs began to pulsate against his. With the sweet taste of her breasts still in his mouth he kissed her with a growing heat that seemed to weld their bodies together. She moved slightly, only a little, with her legs. But it was readiness, a plea to give and a demand to be taken. Wordlessly, their mouths still joined, they came together completely. Her legs locked around his and her breasts seemed to be sending urgent drumbeats into his chest.

They rocked silently together but with a growing rhythm that rose and fell and rose again like the swooping motion of a high-riding, cushioned roller coaster. He felt exhilarated, free, and very much alive, as though a summer wind were whipping into his face to take his breath away while it caught her silky hair and made them both laugh and sing inside themselves. He spoke once, softly, and all he said was—"Alison. . . ." The roller coaster dipped and soared.

She caught her breath and held him very close. Suddenly whatever they were riding on left its tracks and catapulted them into a world that was all sensation, no thought, nothing but ecstatic delight. Holding each other, they took off into space and let the hard earth fall away beneath them.

There were stars up there, and warm breezes, and all kinds of caressing, gentle things, but through everything there was the hot excitement and the strange feeling of endless buoyancy and excruciating pleasure.

But it was not endless. Slowly, luxuriously, they drifted down to earth, and lay in each other's arms with their chests heaving from the exertion and their bodies bathed in a soothing glow.

Alison sighed. "How happy . . . how very happy I am," she muttered drowsily, and drifted with him into sleep.

Afterwards, with the bedside lamp shining so that they could see each other, they talked.

She saw the tiny axe-shaped tattoo he wore on his right elbow. Her fingertips brushed lightly across it. "What is this?" she asked.

"A tattoo, luv, as you can see." Nick tickled her distractingly. "I'm a charter member of the Royal Hatchet Club. We exist merely to blackball would-be members."

"Executioners Anonymous," she said lightly, and tried to bite the words back as she said them. Her eyebrows furrowed over downcast eyes. Nick knew she was remembering what he had done to the killer with the young man's face. "I'm sorry," she said.

"Don't be. Just tell me what you're doing in Cuba—looking for a museum to rob?"

Alison shook her head. "I've reformed. That's all behind me. I came here to get away from the whole scene, to settle down. I'm tired of flitting about from country to country, here a while, there a while, always a new language and another name. I want things to be different now."

Amusement glinted from his eyes. "But you weren't forming when you latched onto me, were you?"

She grinned like a little girl caught with her hand in a cookie jar. "Well, I'm tapering off."

He laughed, and planted a kiss in one small ear. "Just why did you decide to quit?"

She gave a sad little sigh. "I prefer not to talk about it. But . . . I never could quite make the grade. Little

kept happening. Awkward little things. There's no need going into all of them. It's the last one that really did it." Her eyes clouded as she remembered. "We had the jewels, Johnny Arturo and me. It was the Castle Sevilla, you know, and we made quite a haul. Well, he went out first and stood across the moat, just as we'd arranged. I was supposed to throw them to him. . . ." Nick waited. "Well?" he said. She shrugged expressively. "I threw them. There was this awful little splash . . . ! After that there was nothing I could do but—give the whole thing up. It was bad enough, the time I had to hold the flashlight and I dropped it, but this was too much for all of them. It was all I could do to get away, they were so furious. Well, as I said, I don't care to talk about it."

Nick rolled over and laughed with pure delight. When he had recovered he kissed her with renewed vigor, and she soon forgot how badly she had failed Johnny Arturo and his friends.

At last he remembered to ask her—"How did you register downstairs, Alison? Did you use your own name?"

She straightened proudly. "I haven't used it in years. No, I used a brand new one. Out of habit, I guess."

"Good. Because we're going to have to duck out of here quite early in the morning, and something rather nasty's going to be found eventually in your room. The police will be getting very interested in you as well as me, and I want you to be in the clear. But I still need your help, if you want to give it."

She took his hand and held it tightly. "Of course I do. I think I'd do just about anything for you."

Then they started talking seriously about tomorrow.

Later, when she slept again, Nick made a very cautious trip to the silent room on the third floor. With his own hands covered in soft, flexible gloves, he carefully wiped off every surface that he and she might conceivably have touched. Just as carefully, he jammed the closet door that hid his recent caller so that it would discourage the most persistent chambermaid, and had a few harshly persuasive words with the now-wakeful Big Hands. When he was sure of the man's compliance, he freed him, led him out of Alison's room, and prodded him up the stairway to the seventh floor.

It was time to see those shadows in the mountains for himself.

MOUNTAIN MYSTERY

"Out!" he ordered harshly. Hugo clicked open an inch or so below the Strangler's right ear.

Nick stood in the tall grass holding the car door open—not out of courtesy but because the big hands, that seemed to be casually thrust into the pockets, were tied securely to the body.

The Strangler scowled balefully and heaved himself clumsily out of Nick's rented car, which stood several yards off the road under the shade of the tall, thickly-leaved trees. It wasn't exactly hidden, but it wasn't exactly obvious either. Nearby, but not too nearby, was a well-known View, and a little further on was the Highlight Hiking Trail, not nearly so well-frequented as in the heyday of American tourists. Still, the View and the Trail were among the things that visitors to this part of the Sierra Maestras were supposed to see.

They were about thirty-two miles west of Santiago, quite close to something that caused odd shadows, or distortions to appear on photographs taken by high-flying American reconnaissance planes—but not yet close enough to indicate to any follower or watcher that they were heading for that uncertain something.

Nick thrust a little package into his pocket, adjusted the straps of his camera equipment, and slammed the car door shut.

"Move!" He jerked a thumb commandingly in the direction of the Highlight Hiking Trail. The Strangler moved reluctantly.

They walked on for half an hour, staying on the trail at first and ostensibly admiring the view; taking a picture here and there, peering inquisitively down the small paths leading from the main walk, gradually picking up speed until Big Hands began to pant for breath. There was not another

hiker in sight. The occasional swish of cars from the distant main road blended into the sighing of the breeze and then faded altogether.

Nick made a sharp detour behind a tall rock and prodded Big Hands ahead of him. There was no path of any sort in front of them but the tall trees were far enough apart so that they walked on without difficulty. He glanced at his watch. So far, so good. Before leaving the hotel he had called Police Headquarters and obligingly told them something of his plans for the day: how he was going to hire a car, sightsee briefly around the city and in the mountains in the company of a friend, then drive to the airport where he would leave the car to be picked up by the car-hire agency. Then he would fly back to Havana to conclude his business, and hope that by that time they would have solved the mystery of the packaged bomb. Alison had left the hotel ahead of him to take care of her shopping and various other little details, none of which would involve a formal check-out from the Comodoro. The veiled lady who had checked in would simply disappear. Nick had checked her bag out along with his, after picking up the car and then the Strangler, and ditched the bag in a deep gully along the road to the Highlight Hiking Trail. If the police or G-2 were following him—and he suspected strongly that they were—they had been too far behind to see the one quick stop he had made. His own bag was locked in the trunk of the hired car where they could find it if they wished. There was nothing in it to excite their curiosity.

What might excite their curiosity, in the hours or days or weeks to come, could be the identity and whereabouts of Lord Straven's sullen-faced "friend." But if all went well he would never have to answer their justifiably inquisitive enquiries. And if it didn't—it scarcely mattered what they'd ask.

He prodded Big Hands in the back with Hugo's hungry point.

"Faster!" he said crisply.

The Strangler swore and shuffled on.

Five minutes later Nick saw the glint of sunlight against metal. A car stood waiting in the narrow dirt road he had discovered while studying a detailed Tourist Map of the Beautiful Sierra Maestras.

It was vintage Americana, from the pre-embargo days.

and it looked as though it had been stuck together with adhesive tape. But it was a make he had known and trusted since the first car of his boyhood days, and he approved the choice. He was not so sure he approved of what was behind the wheel.

She was a brunette, and he liked brunettes. But the dark hair was drawn back from the face so tightly that the skin seemed parched and stretched, and the thick black eyebrows were set into a darkly unfriendly scowl. A tailored jacket concealed whatever shape there might have been beneath the high-necked blouse.

Nick pursed his lips and whistled.

The expressionless face behind the wheel turned toward him, peered into the trees, and puckered its lips. An enviably piercing whistle split the air around Nick's ears. He took the Strangler firmly by the arm and led him toward the waiting car.

The cold face broke into a warm smile. "Everything okay?" asked Alison.

Nick flung open the back door and thrust the Strangler in.

"Fine," he said, "except that you remind me of an algebra teacher I once knew. She and I didn't get along too well." He climbed in and shut the door. "Any trouble yourself?"

She shook her head and started up. "Smooth as silk; no problems. Straight ahead from here?"

"Right." Nick glanced at the Strangler, sullen in his corner. "For about three miles. Then we consult the navigator for exact directions."

Big Hands snarled as the old car picked up speed.

"None of that," Nick said reprovingly, reaching into his pocket. The Strangler flinched. "Do as you're told and you may yet be all right." The little package came out of Nick's pocket. Big Hands watched him apprehensively.

"You said you wouldn't—" he began.

"And I won't. Not if you cooperate." Nick opened the small packet and shook out a cylindrically shaped object that made Big Hands' bloodshot eyes widen with alarm. Nick opened the cylinder and pulled out the contents. It looked as it swung between his fingers, like a dead and half-skinned animal. "I call him Antonio Moreno," he said, "and so will you."

He pulled the thing down over his head. Alison glanced

been coming in, it could mean that whatever was being built was not yet recognizable even to a man of Trainor's vast experience. And yet he had learned enough to leave a message—"STAR."

Nick glanced at the speedometer. If his calculations were correct they should be less than four miles from the place by now. The road was climbing steeply; according to his mental map it would continue to climb until it flattened out along a plateau to pass within two miles of the mystery site. The trees were thick, concealing whatever might be up ahead.

"All right. Slow down, Alison," he ordered. She slowed. Nick turned to Big Hands. Hugo flicked through the air to hover suggestively an inch or two below the Strangler's ear.

"Now, my friend," Nick said pleasantly, "it's time for you to keep your promise. You're going to show us the turn-off to the site. Alison—keep your gun handy."

She nodded, watching him in the mirror. "It's ready."

"Fine. Our boyfriend was good enough to tell me about a couple of dirt roads that lead off to the place we're heading for. One heads straight into it. The other's not much more than a hiking trail, but Sweetheart here tells me it's good enough for a car for the first couple of miles. That's the one we want. Lead us to it, fella." Hugo nipped the earlobe lightly. "And if we meet anyone along the way, you'll do as I tell you to do. If there's any trouble at all you'll be the first to die. And I'm sure there'll just be time enough for me to make it very painful for you. Now tell the lady where we want to go."

Hugo found a soft place in the thick neck and stayed there, waiting.

"Okay, okay, I'm telling her," the Strangler snarled. "Straight ahead half a mile. Turn left."

The old car rattled forward.

"Slowly, honey," said Nick, "but be ready to jam down on the gas in case of trouble."

"Right." She changed gear. "Do you mind telling me just what this place is, that we're going to?"

"Tell you when I've seen it," said Nick. "Until then I won't know. Careful of that—!" The jalopy swerved sharply.

"Oh, good grief. If there's one thing I can't stand, it's a back seat driver." Alison shot him a resentful look in the rear view mirror. "You're going to have to take a few bumps, buster; the road's built that way."

It was, in fact, getting increasingly bad—so bad that it seemed almost as though someone had deliberately scattered rocks and broken branches along their path. Any self-respecting casual driver would have given up the struggle and turned back.

Alison slowed down to a cautious crawl. "Half a mile," she said. "I don't see any left—oh. Is that it?"

"Yeh," the Strangler growled. "That's it."

Alison stopped. "That" was a pitted narrow path, scarcely wider than the car, bulging with small jutting rocks and slippery with leaves. And a fallen tree lay across its ragged mouth. Not a large tree; just large enough to discourage traffic. Even a hiker might well have gotten the impression that the trail was closed.

Hugo picked thoughtfully at the Strangler's neck.

"You sure that's it?" Nick said sceptically. "Lying's going to hurt you more than it will me."

Big Hands grinned at him unpleasantly. "I do not lie, Señor. Also. I did not say it would be easy. Is too much for you, this path?"

"Is not too much, but is enough," said Alison. She opened her door as Nick opened his, and grasped one end of the tree.

"Don't bother to get out, friend," Nick told the Strangler amiably, hefting his own end of the tree. "We'll manage by ourselves and you'll only get shot in the back. That's fine, Alison. Over here."

With the tree and some of the larger movable rocks out of the way, they rejoined their reluctant guide and steered a course into the woods. Even as a hiking trail it would have been uncomfortable; as a road it was impossible. But then, so was Alison. What she was doing with that rattle-trap car on that ruinous excuse for a track was little short of miraculous. Her strong, slender hands played the wheel with the deft firmness of a skilled fisherman playing a big fish. The car leaped and moaned like a wounded beast, jouncing painfully over unavoidable obstacles and squeezing its way through incredibly narrow spaces that threatened to close in and crush them, but move it did and with surprising speed.

At last she brought it to a rattling stop. There was a small clearing ahead, and then—nothing. Nothing but tall, tight trees and tangled brush interspersed with boulders.

"End of the line," she announced. "I can make a turn, and that's all I can do. You'll have to walk from here."

"Good enough," said Nick. "We're on our way. Make your turn and wait here for me. I don't know how long we'll be, so don't keep the motor running. But if you hear anything—anything at all—start her up and be ready to take off in a hurry. And if anyone else shows up before I do, get going. Don't wait—just go." He opened the back door and swung out onto the narrow path. "Come on, fella. Get moving."

"Yes, but I can't leave—" Alison began.

"You can. You'll have to. Just play it the way we planned it, honey, and don't pick up any strangers. I'll give you the whistle signal as arranged. Out, you!" He grabbed the Strangler's arm and dragged him unceremoniously out of the car. "And Alison. . . ." Nick stopped. Somehow it was hard to find an appropriate way of telling her to be careful and for God's sake not to get hurt now that he'd let her get so deeply involved with his lethal business.

"I'll be careful," she said somberly. "And you, too, Simon. . . . Come back safely."

He raised his hand in a gesture that was half-salute, half-wave, and turned to follow the shambling Strangler across the little clearing. As he entered the tall trees behind the wiry figure with the enormous shoulders he heard the old car grunting busily as it made its turn. The sound rose and fell and faded gradually.

The Strangler plodded on in silence, shouldering his way through thinning trees and thickening brush, stumbling clumsily over boulders that grew higher and higher until they merged into a steep hillside sprouting with thick bush and jagged rocks. The path, that was no path at all, became steadily more steep and difficult. Nick became conscious of the heavy camera equipment dangling by the leather straps from his shoulders. It was not that the weight bothered him, because he was used to it and had carried considerably heavier weights—including men—very often in his time; it was just that it made him aware that the climb was not an easy one; especially for a man whose hands were thrust into his pockets and secured against his body. And yet the Strangler was moving at a quickening pace, and his step was almost jaunty.

He had even started to whistle softly between his teeth.

"Cut that out!" Nick hissed at him, and jabbed him in the rump with Hugo. "You give me the idea that you're warning anyone, and you're finished. Now keep quiet, and keep walking."

The Strangler's rear end twitched and the big shoulders heaved angrily, then slumped. He swore once under his breath and clambered on in silence. But there was something watchful about his attitude, a sort of alertness that had not been there before.

He was looking for something. Not a path, not a hotel site, not an escape route. Well, yes—an escape route of a sort. He was looking for *someone*. And, somehow, looking with confidence, as though he knew for sure that help was near.

Nick thought quickly. He had known that there would be guards about, even though the Strangler had assured him they would meet no one if they took what he called "the back way." But the shifty eyes had wandered when the man had told him that, and Nick had decided to expect some opposition somewhere along the trail. And there was someone up ahead. He knew it as surely as he knew by now that there was only one way to the site. And that was *up*. The maps and the aerial photographs had told him almost everything he had needed to know. All he had wanted from the Strangler was the route . . . the dirt track and the unmarked trail that did not appear on any maps. Without that help he might have beaten the bushes for hours or days and not found what he wanted, or found it only after he had been caught searching.

He looked at the broad back speculatively and wondered how helpful Big Hands could still be. The guard—sentry, patrolman, whatever he was—would have to be dealt with. Even if he could be avoided now he would be a hazard on the way back down. So . . . Big Hands might be persuaded to approach him, under pressure from Hugo, and lull his suspicions long enough for Nick to jump the guard and put him out of action. No. . . . Nick gave a mental shake of the head. Big Hands was afraid of pain and death, all right, so he might try the bluff. But an actor he was not; his face, his manner, would be the giveaway. And, too, there was the possibility that he might try something else. Uh-uh. Not to be trusted.

And yet it would not do to tap him into sleep too soon.

The site was near, somewhere up above, but there was something missing. Sound. It was supposed to be a building site. But instead of bulldozers, he heard birds; instead of cement mixers and the click of brick on brick, the hushing sigh of a soft breeze lightly touching leaves.

Then he saw the sign. At first it was a touch of glinting white half-hidden by a boulder, and then it was a board with Spanish lettering that told of **DANGER! ROCKFALL! DO NOT PASS THIS SIGN.**

And then he was certain that they were very near to a place that would not welcome visitors and whose keepers had thought of this simple but probably effective method of keeping them away.

"All right, stop where you are," Nick grunted softly. "And when you talk, talk quietly."

Big Hands stopped and turned to Nick with something like a sneer on his dull face. "Afraid of falling rock?" he whispered. "You had better be."

"If it falls, it hits both of us," Nick murmured, so quietly that his voice reached no further than the Strangler. "Remember that. And remember also that you only continue to live while you cooperate. You are expecting to meet someone, I gather." He saw the bloodshot eyes widen with surprise and guilt. "You told me we would not. With whom do you prefer to take your chances—with those you have betrayed? Or with me?"

"There is no one to meet—" Big Hands began hissing urgently.

"There is." Hugo touched the mottled cheek and scraped it lightly. "Don't lie. There is a guard. You knew there would be. There must also be a password. What is it? Tell me Quickly." Hugo slid down several inches and stopped above the heart. Nick's eyes bored into the other man's and his words came out between clenched teeth. "What will you say to the man? What are you supposed to say when you come here? *Tell me!*"

"Nothing, nothing, I tell you—nothing!" Sweat beaded the Strangler's forehead. "Always it is only to say I have come from Star. Like in the messages—orders from Star!"

Orders from Star. There it was again. The key word, the key phrase, used as a password. And Trainor could have heard it, even if he had discovered nothing else but a finished building and a guard who checked out visitors.

"Thank you," Nick said softly. "Now let us go on quietly, with no kicking of small stones and no calling out. Be very careful if you see your friend before I do. Because if you're not—either he will kill you, or I will."

Big Hands stared at him for a moment, sweat trickling past his eyes and down his face. In that little fragment of time Nick almost heard something: a sense of sound rather than sound itself; vibration, more than noise.

The Strangler turned very slowly, like a man forcing himself to face a firing squad with the faint hope that it might not really be there. Or like a man hoping desperately that help would come in time but afraid it would not. He moved forward sluggishly.

"We're not there yet," he muttered. "You be careful. You find nothing without me."

A prod from Hugo was his only answer. Nick was close behind; very, very close. Big Hands was getting too desperate to be allowed any room for sudden moves. And both of them knew that something was about to break.

It broke. They heard it at the same time—a clearly audible sound. Not a vibration, but the rolling of a pebble and the sharp cracking of a dry twig.

The Strangler stopped abruptly. For a split second they both froze, listening to the something that was moving up ahead. Then Big Hands moved. His body lurched forward into a running stance and his head went back as if to gather volume for the howl Nick knew was coming.

Nick's move was just a fraction of a second quicker. His arm shot out, Hugo still clutched in his hand, and looped around the neck and its straining vocal cords with the lightning speed of a guillotine and the strangling bite of a hangman's noose. The faint beginnings of a gargle from the Strangler's throat ended in a choking swallow. Hugo would have let him scream. Nick's slowly tightening arm would not.

"If you keep quiet," Nick whispered into a shapeless ear, "you can still get out of this alive." The Strangler's heaving body stopped squirming. Nick held his grip, no longer tightening it, but holding firm so that no sound would escape the half-crushed throat.

Nick listened. Someone several yards away beyond the boulders was walking, stopping, walking, stopping; pacing slowly back and forth among the twigs and pebbles. It must

be a flat stretch for him to walk like that, Nick thought. And then he felt the earth vibrate again.

Felt it vibrate and heard it rumble.

Now he knew how close he was.

He knew also that he could no longer rely upon the Strangler for cooperation with whoever paced so casually back and forth beyond the boulders. And he knew that he had no further need of the man as a guide. He had found the place.

The Strangler knew it, too. For a moment he stood listening to the same sounds Nick could hear, and then he gave a sudden twist of his body and kicked out savagely.

It was a pity for him that he did, because it killed him. With a little time for finesse Nick could have sent him into a long, deep sleep from which he would eventually have recovered. Like Softshoe, for instance, who was probably even now enjoying his coma in some nice comfortable hospital. But Big Hands was kicking his way to death. A stone flew from beneath his foot and clattered noisily down the slope. Nick tightened his stranglehold around the corded neck and lifted Big Hands bodily, all the strength in his own Yoga-trained body channeled into his lifting arm and all the strength of that arm concentrated on that neck. The flailing feet no longer kicked at pebbles but lashed out futilely at Nick. The big-shouldered body writhed, helpless and feeble against the crushing vise of human muscle.

Nick held on relentlessly. One stab with Hugo and it would be over. But somehow he preferred to end this man as the fellow would have ended him. By choking him to death.

The legs twitched and were still. The body hung limp and heavy on Nick's arm like a sack of wet cement. Carefully, quietly, Nick carried it to the largest of the nearby boulders and lowered it out of sight behind the rocks. For moments all he could hear was the sound of his own movements, but his eyes flickered over the hillside as he finished his work. No one above, no one behind, and the one somewhere ahead not yet in sight. He stood dead still for a moment, listening. The pacing had stopped. And then it began again, this time very quietly and coming directly toward him from several yards away.

He ran almost straight upward very quickly, leaping the rocks like a mountain goat and landing soundlessly on

row ledge he had spotted from below. Crouching low, he looked down at the scene he had just left.

The Strangler lay crumpled behind the rock. A couple of yards beyond him was a ridge of boulders that stretched for several feet and then dropped sharply to an almost level space. A man was walking cautiously across that space, almost tiptoeing, his head cocked to one side and his hands clutching a rifle whose butt rested snugly against his shoulder. He looked almost like a hunter stalking deer. Except that hunters seldom wear olive-drab uniforms and do not commonly equip their rifles with bayonets.

Nick stared down at him, catching a glimpse of slightly Oriental features under the peaked cap. Well, that didn't necessarily mean anything. There were many such faces in Cuba, and had been for generations. But this one was no ordinary Cuban—not with that uniform, that cautious tread, that bayonet. It was tough, about that bayonet. They were tricky things to jump on from above. He looked around; found what he thought he wanted—hefted it for weight and size—looked down, satisfied.

The man in uniform had stopped again. He stood hesitating at the ridge of boulders separating him from the body of the Strangler. And he hesitated just too long. It gave Nick time to take perfect aim, to gather power into his arms and shoulders, and to pitch the big, jagged stone he'd found and watch it plumb down straight and true like a bomb onto its target.

There was an ugly splintering sound, a muted thud, a quiet clattering of rock and metal; and then silence. The man could not have known what hit him. And he never would.

Nick looked down at the crushed head and turned away. The hillside rose above him steeply. It was a tough climb. Perhaps there was an easier way. But this was not impossible, and it was direct. He climbed straight upward, grating again, as he had so often been before, for the finely ridged and sturdy rubber soles of his specially built shoes. His toes and finger groped for minuscule holes, held them, and moved on. Slowly, cautiously, he climbed.

In spite of years of Yoga training he was gasping slightly from exertion when he reached the top. He stopped and rested for a moment, listening for the rumbling vibration and not hearing it; listening for other sounds and hearing none. But this had to be the place.

No more than a few feet above him the hillside flattened out into what was probably a small plateau. Beyond it he could see other peaks rising mistily, although not to great heights because he was already thousands of feet above sea level. He was sure that what he had come to find was immediately above him and in front of him on a level stretch or in a valley.

He pulled himself up over the last few feet and found himself peering through a barbed wire fence onto a small plain scattered with rocks and trees. But apart from the rocks and trees . . . there was nothing.

Absolutely nothing.

THE PLACE THAT WASN'T THERE

He stared incredulously across the plateau with its scattering of scrub and rocks and spindly trees and wondered if it was his eyesight or his mind that he was losing.

Immediately in front of him was the fence and a low growth of tangled brush. The fence extended for some distance to either side of him. Where the slope was less precipitous and the hilltop more easily accessible to a climber the fence was reinforced with thick rolls of heavily barbed wire. But the fence in front of him, perched almost as precariously as Nick himself, was a lesser obstacle than the steep rock that led up to it.

The small table-land that lay ahead of him beyond the fence was roughly circular and almost flat-topped, as if it had been a mountain peak aeons ago and had had its head sliced off by some violent act of nature. But nature had long since settled down and covered the earth with growth in the form of stunted trees that at their tallest were very little higher than Nick. Some of them were clumped together; others were separated by knots of bush and the rough shapes of rocky outcroppings. A man—in fact, a small platoon of men—could be hidden from his view. But

there was nothing so tall or closely packed together that his vision of the full sweep of the plateau was in any way obscured. There was no sign of anything in the process of being built. There was no suggestion of a clearing and no vestige of construction material. There was not a murmur of sound.

It was impossible. But there it was—nothing but a scrubby little plain on a mountain top. And yet, according to the Strangler, this was the "hotel" site; and according to the charts and photographs it was indisputably the place he'd come to find.

Then, too, there was the wire fencing and the dead men down below. It was not every little tangled mountain top that had such interesting accessories.

Nick secured his foothold on the hillside and flicked Hugo from his sheath. The wires, he was thinking, might have current running through them, and he had no desire to end his days clinging painfully to an electrically charged fence.

Hugo's metal blade reached out and gently tapped the wire. There was a hissing spat of spark and sound that sent its shockwave clear through Hugo's insulated haft and jolted him from Nick's hand. Nick swore softly and groped for the stiletto, snatching it quickly as it slid metallicity down the boulder beneath his feet. He put Hugo back into his sheath and gave the wired obstacle some serious thought.

It was impossible to leap the fence from where he crouched. He had nothing with him to throw over it for insulation. The strands of wire were too close together for him to sidle through. There was no way for him to pull and hold them apart. He had no way of breaking the circuit. Unless . . . But he was out of luck. Whatever stones could be of use were out of reach. Anyway, he'd need two hands, and his perch was precarious enough with the slender handhold that he had. So that was out, at least for now. That left one thing for him to do, and that was climb it.

Here again he had a choice. The first one he discarded quickly. Theoretically he should be able to scale the fence by clutching the hot wires firmly with both hands, instantaneously, so that the current would course briskly through one hand and come out the other. But to try that out on unknown voltage was an experiment that did not appeal to him. He decided on the only other way.

His eyes traveled along the length of the fence until they reached a wooden post, the nearest fence stake anchored in the soil. Great! There he had a piece of luck—if he could only reach it without breaking his neck. The space between it and where he was crouching now would have challenged an aerialist, but the distance was short and if he was very careful he could make it. And the stake, because it was a stake, was sunk quite deeply into the earth a good eighteen inches or more from the edge. It left a ledge that he could use, still not wide enough to allow him to vault the high and death-charged fence, but big enough to give him solid footing for the first leg of his final climb.

He slung the camera equipment back over his shoulder and plastered himself against the stone-and-dirt face of the cliff. His hands clawed out and grasped at roots and rocks while his feet probed the rocky shelf for any tiny footholds it could offer. Slowly, painstakingly, he edged and eased his way to where the fence stake stood planted in the soil.

He reached out for the stake. And as he grasped it with one hand the dry, root-tangled earth beneath his feet gave way and crumbled down the hillside, leaving him swinging in the air holding onto life with one hand on a brittle fence pole and his chest jammed painfully against the ledge.

His feet dug frantically into the crumbling soil and found a tiny bit of leverage, just enough for him to grasp the pole with both hands and pull himself onto the narrow space between murderous fence and the drop beneath it. For a moment he stood there, catching his breath and offering up heartfelt prayer to whatever deity protected spies; and he stood there he heard the noise again. Somewhere, screened somehow by those scrawny trees and muffled by God on knew what kind of sorcery, machines were rumbling about their work. But still there was no sign of movement.

Nick grasped the wooden pole as high as he could reach keeping his body clear but leaning his weight forward so that, if the pole should tilt beneath his weight, it would incline toward the land rather than toward the drop.

It stirred slightly in its moorings but it stayed firmly anchored in the soil. He held it tightly, like a rope-climber, and with infinite care, so that neither his hands nor any part of his body but his feet would come in contact with the deadly wires. And his feet were soled with heavy rubber—sufficient insulation against any charge. He hoped.

Two: a sturdy wooden stake, short but solid, driven firmly into the ground. Three: a thin, tough wire running from the stake to—Four: a boulder that flattened out as he approached it. And, five: a second stake that was driven clean through hard rock that was not rock at all.

And what was strange about the shadows cast by those things that were not quite rocks and not quite trees was that they were very short for the position of the sun, as if the objects were much lower than they seemed at first.

They were.

Nick dropped to his hands and knees and followed the wire leading from the stake until he reached the non-rock. Like the boulder in front of it, the tree beside it and the bushes beyond it, it was a painting—in relief. What would surely be taken for a cluster of trees from high above were thick daubs of green paint splattered over a treetop-shaped bulge that was perhaps eight to ten inches in depth rather than eight to ten feet above ground level. And what seemed like rock-hard boulders were large blobs of painted, papier-mâché-like material rising from a base of something like tough nylon canvas.

It was enviably expert camouflage, so cunningly contrived that even at close range it was not at once apparent where reality left off and artful illusion began. Nick touched it, and marveled. His fingers told him first where nature blended into artifice, and then his eyes saw it. Scatterings of twigs and leaves and soil and little pebbles concealed the edge of the material, which itself was relief-painted with exact representations of natural growth and matter. It was, he thought, much like the dioramas in New York's Museum of Natural History, where the painted background so perfectly picks up and extends the motif and shapes and colors of the three-dimensional foreground that the eye accepts the whole as true perspective.

The only major difference was that this vista had been arranged largely for viewing from above. Now that he stood so close to it that he was almost in the picture himself he was no longer fooled by the height of the objects in front of him. Not a single tree or rock reached any higher than his knees over a distance of several hundred feet. Beyond that, he saw, objects once again grew to their natural height.

He brushed away loose soil and twigs until he found the edge of the artificial stretch of scrubland. The material was

stretched as tautly as a drumskin, held in place with a spike driven through it and again by another stake connected to the first by the thin, tough wire he had noticed moments earlier. There had to be other stakes, he knew, because the area was large and the covering material did not give the impression, anywhere, of being supported from underneath or of sagging for want of support.

He groped around through the trees and scrub until he had found three more stakes, each of them thrust deep into the earth through the strange material and doubly secured by the second stake. The camouflage was not flung over something, he was sure; it was stretched across an open space. And it was as tough as rhino hide.

Again he looked around and listened. If there were guards, they were well-hidden. The only sound was the throbbing rumble of concealed machinery.

It came from beneath the camouflage.

Nick slid the stiletto from its sheath and crawled across the boundary line between reality and fake. He pushed down hard against a stretch of flat, twig-scattered rock and felt it give slightly beneath his hand. But only slightly. Whatever the material was, it was strong and about as flexible as a thick layer of rubber tire. He plunged Hugo's razor-edged blade down into the stuff and found a resistance that surprised him.

AXE's Editing Department would be interested in this, if he could ever get a sample to them. He hacked away energetically until he had removed a small square about four inches across and more than one inch thick, and when it came free he thrust it into the pocket of his pants. Then he peered down into the opening.

A faintly musty breeze caught his nostrils, like a breath of stale air from a tomb. But the cavern underneath the covering was more brightly lit and infinitely larger than any tomb he had ever seen. He inched forward and clamped his face against the opening, feeling the camouflage material sag slightly beneath the weight of his body like a rubber mattress. But it held him as securely as if it had been a gigantic safety net.

What he saw below him, bathed in lights stronger than the dappled sunlight on the trees behind him, was a building site.

It was not quite like anything he had ever seen before.

and yet some of its elements were horribly familiar—those big, circular holes, for instance, lined with what looked like solid rings of concrete; and the air of dedicated, efficient activity among the workers, characteristic less of the civilian than the military. They looked, in fact, as though they were wearing some Eastern nation's version of fatigues. But he could catch only distant glimpses of their faces and could not be sure of what he thought he saw.

What he was sure of was the nature of the site and how it had been put to use. Directly beneath him he could see the natural slope of the land that was now covered by the camouflage. The lights from below cast only a dim glow on the upper slopes, but it was enough for him to see that what had looked like a mountain table-land from only a short distance away was actually a shallow valley with a man-made lid on top. Its sides sloped gently down to a bed that nature must have made nearly flat and planted with lush undergrowth. Now it was perfectly level—but for the gaping round holes—and all undergrowth was gone.

Nick eased back from his peephole through the whatever-it-was and opened up his camera case. It was an unusual although it looked pretty much like one of the expensive twin-lens reflexes, and it came equipped with very special lenses and highly sensitive film. He was almost sorry there was so much light bathing the scene below; he would have liked to try out the photo-emissive cell and test the film to the limits of its sensitivity, but he wouldn't need to. He could, though, make good use of the snooper-scope and its telephoto extension.

First he attached AXE's latest model of the snooperscope, which they had christened "Busybody" because of its highly developed ability to nose out secrets and pass them on to interested parties, such as the men at headquarters; and then he backed off several yards from the edge of the camouflage to take what the photographic boys referred to as establishing shots.

The Busybody was viewfinder and lens combined. Nick put the rubber, cup-shaped eyepiece close against his eye and squinted through it. Sharp colors and differently textured shapes leaped back at him with startling clarity, bringing natural objects into 3-D vision and flattening out the camouflage like a backdrop on a stage. He shot busily for several minutes, varying distance and angle as much as he

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could without moving too far from the little aperture he'd cut. What he wanted was a set of pictures that would show exactly how and where the incredible material—canvas-nylon-rubber-water-repellent-paint-and-papier-mâché—was being used. When he had covered the exterior exhaustively he attached the telescopic extension and moved back to the hole he'd cut. Afterwards, perhaps, he would have an opportunity to walk completely around the hidden valley on a general survey of the area, but right now it was more important to record what was going on below. And, if possible, what kind of people were running the show.

He stretched out full-length with his legs on natural earth and his body across the roughly-textured, fertile material. Again, there was only the slightest sagging sensation. The stuff was fantastic! Hawk would be fascinated.

Adjusting the camera straps about his neck so the lens
back rather than his arms would take the full weight of the
heavy equipment, he looked down into the valley through
the camera's snooping eye.

Once again all shapes and colors were of ordinary distinctness, colors brilliant and clear as though outlined with an invisible line, the Busybody first as a general impression over the whole sweep of the scene, then he fixed every detail of it as he would with the shutter method. The outside world and his

He framed and shot the
idle near the gaping
still busy churning
into the forms of
yards of the
valley, and caught
rumbling inter-
by eye or
enough with
and clicked
were unmis-
ican, almost
Chinese.

And what was _____
a missile launch

Test _____

film, and he took each one with individual care. A jeep, a truck, a bulldozer; a group of working men; close-ups of individual faces, distorted by the high angle but still recognizable for what they were; immense crates, still-unpacked, but significant for their great size; a wide shot of all six giant holes; additional shots of separate holes and the men who were still lining them with rising rings of concrete.

At last he pulled back from his peephole and packed his camera away. Here was proof, solid and incontrovertible, that Cuba was preparing a new rocket fleet to mount against —whom? Almost certainly, the United States. And not, this time, with Russian help. But the interesting thing was how many Chinese faces he had captured in his finder, and how few faces looked remotely Cuban. Not one of the men down below had been dressed in Cuban Army uniform. There was not an officer in sight. But there were fatigue-dressed Chinamen strolling about and giving orders, as though they were the bosses of the team.

It looked very much as though the Castro Government had turned their defense arrangements over to the Communist Chinese. And yet the man who used the code name "Star" was supposed to be a Spanish cigar importer named Carlos Ramon Y'Ortega. . . .

Nick frowned down into the pit. An aggressive act against Cuba was among the last things in the world that AXE or the U.S. Government wanted. This was the kind of situation that should be dealt with by the United Nations. But by the look of things below, the missile base might be operative within the next week or ten days. And prevention was always so much better than a cure.

Even a delay would help.

He reached into his pants pocket for Pierre.

Pierre looked like a large metal marble, but his looks were the least of his talents. He was a hollow sphere containing a small quantity of exceptionally lethal gas. Used in a comparatively small space, he was death in little more than thirty seconds. Used in a large area, such as the space below, he made people very ill and did uncomfortable things to their nerves. So uncomfortable that bedrest and close medical attention were required.

Nick applied pressure and gave an abrupt twist, waited out a count of five and gave the final turn. The tiny timer within Pierre's ingenious mechanism started marking off the

seconds with the slightest of time finding himself. As fifteen seconds. Nick threw, and watched the H-S puller spring down the slope to the shallow valley below. Another fifteen—thirteen—ten seconds, and he would go to work. Nick decided not to wait for him, but to spend a few minutes running around the edges of the camouflage.

In the split second between making his decision and doing to his feet, he felt the movement beneath him.

It was only the faintest of shudders in the false ground under his crouched knees. But it communicated to his body like a wave of shock. He looked up quickly and stared across the fake plateau, his hand darting instinctively to draw out Wilhelmina.

A blob of camouflage was moving slowly toward him across the painted rubbery mass. It was green and brown, had four limbs, a face, and a look of concentrated menace. It crawled along at a low crouch, the deliberate movements of its feet causing temporary dents in the strange material and sending shuddery waves through the mass to quiver beneath Nick's feet.

The camouflage that was a man was carrying a gun. It was a submachine gun and it was leveled at Nick's heart.

AND, WITH LUCK, AWAY WE GO

It was too late to worry about noise. The other fellow wasn't going to bawl could not afford to. Almond eyes stared into his across the profit and the figure stopped.

Two guns spun in order, one with a single clean shot and the other with a fusillade that screamed past Nick's ears as he flung himself back into the scanty cover of the genuine scrub behind him. Wilhelmina thrust her nose up and barked again. The camouflaged man faltered briefly, then took a little stumbling run toward him with the submachine gun springing hot death between the straggly trees. Nick felt something else through his shirt sleeve like a molten knife and a

fraction of an instant later a bullet bit viciously into his camera case and ricocheted off into the trees. He fired back rapidly with two swift shots so close together that they were almost one and saw them smash into their target. The man fell forward with a choking scream, his fingers still clutching the trigger as if welded to it. Searing bullets ripped into the rubbery material and slammed their deadly message down into the hollow below. Nick cursed, and ran. Pierre was getting unexpected reinforcements down there, and maybe just a few seconds too soon. How long could it take them to send an armed troop swarming onto the valley road to ring the hillside—? Only instants, probably. And if Pierre's deadliness had not yet taken hold it would dissipate in the open air.

Nick struck out through the brush and ran with great loping strides toward the electric fence. Now, too late, he cursed himself for not having shorted it before.

The gun clamped in the dead man's hands still chattered on behind him. If he had dropped down in their midst himself he could scarcely have alerted them to his presence and his whereabouts more obviously. He suddenly saw a vivid mental picture of what might have happened down below—a killing stream of bullets tearing into a group of working men from out of the blue, cutting them to screaming ribbons. It was an ugly thought. But there was a more cheering one, from Carter's point of view: they would already have heard the fire from above, and the sudden attack in their very midst might—just possibly—confuse them and delay them.

There, thank God, was the fence. But where in hell had he left those two big stones?

He slowed his running steps and jogged along the length of the fallen fence. Ah! There they were. He thrust Wilhelmina down into his waistband and scooped the stones up with both hands, placing one on either side of the lowest strand of jagged wire. It was then that he heard the shouts answering each other and the sounds of feet crashing through the brush. He drew his hands slightly apart to give himself some leverage and slammed the stones together with the wire between them. Goddamn! Not quite. The wire flattened between the two swift-striking stones, but held. He slammed again with all his force, feeling a jolt of pain in his upper arm where the bullet had creased it. This time there was a little crackling, explosive sound and the wire strand parted.

Now he could locate the direction of the running feet: they were on the plateau, and they were coming rapidly toward him. He whipped Wilhelmina from his waistband and touched her metal nose to each of the parallel wires in turn. No reaction. The break had shorted them. He crouched low and slithered through the space left by the broken wire, hearing the cries and footsteps drawing closer by the second. But they were not coming directly at him; there was an uncertainty about the movements that made him think that his pursuers did not yet know exactly where he was. And that would be a help.

Nick started climbing downward quickly. Too late he thought of how wonderfully and horribly ironic it would have been to return exactly as he had come and leave the electrically charged fence to spit its deadly message at whoever might come after him. But maybe it was just as well he hadn't tried it—in the rush of his retreat he might have touched the deadly wires and gotten hung up on them himself. And as a target he would have been just too good to miss.

He looked up. There was still no sign of close pursuit, although the sounds were growing louder. From where he was, it looked as though that low ridge of brush might hide the dangling wire for a little while at least.

The climb down was easier than the upward haul. He moved so rapidly that it was only when he reached the Strangler's lifeless body that he heard the shouting voices high above him at the crest of the steep hillside. The fence, by now, was almost hidden from his view, so that he would not have seen it if he hadn't known exactly where to look. But he did know, and as he gave it a parting look he saw two blobs of moving, shouting camouflage beyond it. He leapt over the dead Strangler and the high boulders beyond the body with long, distance-eating strides. A volley of shots slammed into the rocks behind him and he zigzagged briskly down the unmarked, sloping path he had walked along an hour—two hours?—before.

For long, valuable moments there were only shots and shouts behind him, no running feet. Then all sounds faded as he left them well behind. For about thirty seconds he heard nothing but his own hard breathing and his clambering running feet. The path became easier, and he guessed that he would reach the grove and the little clearing beyond it.

about three or four minutes. It began to look as though he'd cooled them with the fence.

And then he heard them. A rock rolled and clattered to stop somewhere along the trail he'd taken. A harsh voice marked an order. More stones clattered and the undergrowth behind him became filled with crackling sounds. He dodged behind a rock and took a rapid look around. They were still out of sight and sounded as though they were fanning out, but some of the pursuing noises were getting uncomfortably close—and suddenly the first man came into view. He was tall and long-legged, with a distance-melting stride that matched Nick's own, and he was following the trail with the speed and keenness of a hunting dog.

Nick took careful aim. Let the running man come a little closer while he scanned the tangled growth to see how many others might be near. Saw none.

And fired.

The man dropped like a falling tree, soundless but for the thud of his body and the clatter of his gun. Nick streaked off toward the tall trees in the distance.

One minute. Two minutes. Nearly there. Soon he should be hearing the sound of a running motor.

The air exploded with bursts of rapid gunfire. He crouched low and took a slalom course toward the tall trees hearing the bite of bullets into wood and rock much too close behind him. Twigs and pebbles slithered beneath his feet. Another hundred yards . . . feet . . . inches . . . and at last he flung himself into the grove of trees. Bullets sang and spat behind him. He drew a deep breath and gave a piercing, three-note whistle and ran on through the trees, dodging outflung roots and hot lead. There was only a few yards left and the trees were thinning. But he could not hear the motor, nor could he see the car where he expected it. He whistled again and heard a bullet thunk into a tree bare branches behind him.

His feet skidded dangerously over slippery leaves and fallen forest rot. For one heart-stopping moment he thought they would fly out from under him and leave him at the mercy of his hunters but he caught himself in mid-skid and went on running. Now, certainly, he should see the car. . . . But it was gone. His heart dropped like a lump of lead into his stomach. She had left. He had told her to get going if he felt she had to, but somehow he had expected her to

wait for him no matter what. He cursed himself bitterly. It had been too much to ask of her. Of course he should have expected her to leave when the going got rough. Or else—and his heart dropped even lower as he flung himself across the tiny clearing—someone else had gotten to her first.

Someone else had.

He saw the sprawled figure about five yards beyond the place where he had expected to see the car.

It was as still as Death and its outslung arm seemed to be clawing frantically for a gun that was inches beyond its reach, as if it had dropped when its small owner had fallen to the ground. Nick saw the red crease on the forehead and ran on.

The chances were the figure would rise again some time and reach for the gun. It wasn't dead.

Neither was it Alison.

He whistled again, shrilly, and this time he got an answer. Two answers. One was the throbbing of a motor and the other was a piercing whistle that put his own to shame.

Nick scrambled down the slippery, rock-and-leaf-strewn path and saw metal glinting through the trees. Shots whined behind him but they were nothing to him now. He rounded a curve in the makeshift road and saw the old car moving very slowly yards ahead of him. The back door flapped gently as the jalopy jogged along. He gave one more triumphant whistle, feeling his erratic heart soar back into its rightful place, and grabbed the door handle.

The ancient motor roared as he clambered in and slammed the door against the outside world.

"So what kept you?" Alison asked interestedly, revving her steed into a hearty gallop. "Sorry I had to move along, but this little creature came creeping out of the bushes and I thought I'd better let him have it. Not to kill, you understand. Just to keep him in his place." She changed gear busily. "You all right? You look a little bloody."

"Dandy," he said. "Thank God you're okay. And try to keep your head down, will you? We've still got company."

"I hear it," she said drily, and scrunched down in the seat. "I leave it to you to hold them off because I warn you—I'm no good at changing tires."

It was an apt warning and he already had Wilhelmina jammed against the rear window. The car barreled down the corrugated track and he watched the clearing recede rapidly.

behind them. A running figure appeared, gun raised to fire. The car swerved violently around an obstacle and a bullet sang past them uselessly. Alison twisted the wheel and slammed the car in a sudden turn that took it through a tree-crowded space that made Nick wince.

"You'll never make it—" he began. And stopped, because they had already made it.

Now the sounds of pursuit came at right-angles to the car. Nick cranked the window down and sighted at a piece of slithering camouflage. He fired once. The follower screamed, threw his weapon in the air, and dropped.

The car lurched energetically and made another turn. Alison pumped the gas and took off like a bird. All at once the road seemed like the smoothest macadam compared to the rugged forest trail. Nick jerked his head around. They were back on the dirt road that had led them to the turn-off and were heading downhill like a rattling rocket.

When he looked back again he saw the jeep. It was jouncing down the road behind them about three hundred yards away. It must have come, he figured, from the road that led directly to the valley site.

"I see it," Alison said calmly. Miraculously, the old car found fresh reserves of energy and picked up speed like an old man who has spotted a pair of gorgeous legs sauntering along ahead of him.

The jeep clattered on behind them. Nick stuck his head and gun hand cautiously out of the side window and watched it slowly gaining. Alison started weaving like a drunk, but a drunk with phenomenal powers of speed and discipline. Shots bit into the dirt yards short of them. But the jeep was picking up speed. Nick aimed. Still too far for him to be sure of hitting wheel or windshield, but any moment now. And the same was true for those who were shooting from the jeep.

Nick squeezed the trigger gently. And then a strange thing happened. So strange that he released the trigger without firing and just stared.

It was the jeep, now, that was behaving like a drunk. It swayed and bounced across the road, a thing possessed, and first it speeded up and then it slowed. And then it swerved clear across the road and slammed into a tree. The last thing Nick saw before Alison took the next swooping

curve was an armed man in fatigues crawling unsteadily out the back of the jeep and retching on the road.

Pierre had managed to be useful, after all.

For the next few minutes they drove on in comparative silence. The only sounds were the rattling of the old jalopy and Alison's voice raised in a tuneless little song.

No one was following them.

Nick peeled off the mask and wadded his handkerchief beneath his shirtsleeve against his bleeding shoulder. While he dressed he looked at Alison and listened to her tuneless little song.

"You drive better than you sing," he said finally, pulling on Lord Straven's jacket. "In fact, you drive better than anyone I know. As a matter of fact I even like the way you sing."

"I do drive well," she said gravely. "They always said I did. I suppose you've wondered why they put up with me. It's because I can smell a phony at a hundred yards—though I don't always smell him right. And because I can drive any kind of car, make any getaway. And open any kind of lock. My only problem is. . ."

"You drop things," Nick finished for her, inspecting his camera and finding it intact. "But you didn't drop this one, baby, and I will always love you for it."

"I hope you will," she said. "Maybe enough to tell me what this is all about. Or don't spies ever tell their secrets?"

He stared at her image in the mirror. "We try not to," he said finally.

She gave a crooked little grin. "You do, anyway. But don't worry, Simon baby—whoever you are, I'm on your side."

There was still no one coming after them when she dropped him off at their original meeting place and promised to ignore him on the plane. He watched the dust settle on the road behind her and waited several minutes to be sure she was not being followed before striking off through the woods toward his own hired car.

He met a hiker on the trail who gave him a friendly smile and went along his way.

There was a car parked not too far from his. He ambled slowly toward his own, mopping his brow like a man pleasantly exhausted from a long and invigorating walk. There was one man in the car and another strolling about looking as though he did not particularly enjoy the view. Nick

smiled at him, his fingers twitching to get at Wilhelmina, and they nodded back.

His car was undisturbed. So was Nick, after the first few seconds of doubt. He drove off, sure that they would follow him downhill sooner or later; equally sure that they would do no more than follow him. They were simply plainclothesmen doing their job, and that was to keep an eye on a man who'd come uncomfortably close to being blown to pieces by a bomb in a hotel bathtub.

He drove back to Santiago at a comfortable pace and let the other car pass him along the road. No one bothered him on the way. And he made the evening plane with a good half-hour to spare. The only thing aboard it that looked familiar was a smiling mouth that turned away when he caught the matching eyes. And, of course, the little stumbling movement as a pair of exquisite legs made their way along the aisle.

There was the usual hassle over cabs at the Havana Airport. Nick watched Alison find one to share with a young mother carrying a baby, and took the bus himself. Again, he was uncomfortably aware of someone watching him. But the bus was full and it was impossible to pinpoint the staring eyes. He only knew that there were several people on the bus who had not been on his plane and he looked them over with a casual eye. No one met his gaze. And yet his sixth sense told him positively that someone nearby was very interested in him.

Someone was. There had been two observers, but Armando Maceo had stayed at the crowded airport only long enough to finger Nick and turn him over to a man who had done several jobs for him and Carlos before, including that half-bungled business of the boat in which the Yankee had managed to leave some kind of message on the deck. It was a matter of considerable annoyance to Armando that Straven had come back from Santiago and the Strangler had not. Strangler was a good man at his job. And Straven was altogether too slippery a customer.

Armando hurried to his own car and headed back toward the Casa Del Jaguar. He had been away altogether too long, after Carlos had snarled the order at him to go to the airport and stay there until he saw Straven coming back and then have someone else take care of him. It was getting to be

about the time that things usually started warming up at the Club.

So he left, driving rapidly and wondering if Carlos had had any news from Santiago in the meantime. But whatever the news, Straven's death sentence had been passed.

The man he had left to attend to Nick was small and unobtrusive, even though he carried a cane. It only made him look even more inconspicuous and fragile, somehow.

He was still behind Nick when Lord Straven returned to his hotel after the long day's absence.

And he was in the big lobby making patient plans when Carmela hurried in. She was in too much of a hurry to notice him—a man whom she thoroughly disliked and whose presence here would have caused her deep distrust—but her arrival was of considerable interest to The Cane. It made him think he needed to adjust his plans. But that was surely something he could do without consulting Carlos. It might, indeed, be a triumphant feather in his cap.

The first thing Nick did after picking up his stored bag was to put a call through on a house telephone to Alison O'Reilly's room. She answered at once and assured him that all was well. He suggested that she have a good night's sleep and meet him for an early breakfast. Rather regretfully, he thought, she agreed and rang off.

He went up to his room and inspected it carefully. No one but the maid had been here since he'd left. To his great relief, Oscar Johnson had not been tampered with. He closeted himself in the bedroom and prepared a message, wondering as he did so how he could best manage another meeting with Carmela.

It was still very early in the London morning, but when Red Turner aroused himself he would receive a message that read, as translated:

SITE IS MISSILE BASE ALMOST COMPLETELY STAFFED CHICOMS AND NEARING COMPLETION. STAR EQUALS ORTEGA. NO DIRECT LINK PROVED YET BETWEEN BASE OR ORTEGA AND CUBAN GOVERNMENT, SO SUGGEST EXTREME CAUTION AND PREPARATION OF DOCUMENT XA. SUPPORTING MATERIAL TO BE SENT EARLIEST IN CARE OF S & H YOUR ATTENTION.

USE OWN JUDGMENT AND SEND ALL DATA SOON-
EST. GIVE MY LOVE TO THE BLONDE.

Nick grinned and put Oscar Johnson back to bed. It was the last time he would use the radio, he decided, at least in the hotel. If anyone had been tuned in to the curiously worded messages flying between Havana and London they might get interested enough to start playing around with a direction finder.

He realized suddenly that he was starving and that he hadn't had a drink since the night before. Definitely this was something that had to be remedied at once. He opened his bedroom door and headed for the liquor supply in the living room, and it was only then that he heard the sharp, repeating rapping on the front door of his suite.

Not Alison. She would have come in without knocking.

"Who is it?" he called.

There was an exclamation of impatience. "At last! It's me, Carmela. Quickly, let me in!"

DEATH CARRIES A CANE

Nick opened the door a cautious couple of inches and braced his body against it. He was prepared for anything up to a platoon of killers, but Carmela stood alone outside tapping her foot impatiently. She filled his vision—dark hair piled high upon her head, red lips glistening, eyes snapping with green fire—and a dark bruise mottling her lovely chin.

"Carmela!" he said, forcing passion and concern into his

"I know when you came back!" Her voice was harsh with what seemed to him to be anger. She stopped in the middle of the living room and swung around to face him. "Carlos says that you and your accomplices have been interfering in our business affairs—spying on the hotel and causing trouble at the site."

"Accomplices! Spying!" He laughed incredulously. "Carmela, I think your Carlos is out of his mind. What accomplices, for instance?"

"How should I know who they are?" she snapped. "A big man with a swarthy, snarling face, and an ugly woman—that's all I know. Except that you told me you were going to Pinar del Rio and you went to Santiago instead. And after that all sorts of things started happening at the site. Workers hurt, sabotage, all sorts of things. Why did you go to Santiago?"

Her eyes flashed angrily. She looked incredibly beautiful and alive.

"I had a change of plan," he said mildly, though his mind was churning furiously. "An opportunity for a business deal came up in Santiago, I went there for a meeting, I came back. I shall have to make my trip to Pinar del Rio tomorrow, instead." He put a touch of menace in his voice. "But may I ask, my dear Carmela, how you happen to know so much about my comings and goings? The last time we talked you were going to wait for me—not have me followed."

She had the grace to lower her eyes. "It wasn't I who had you followed. It was Carlos—and Armando. I had nothing to do with it—Armando had you followed from the moment you left my bedroom."

"And you are angry," he said softly, letting the wonderment play across his face. "I offered you, with all my heart, everything a man can give a woman. And you come to me, angry because friends of yours have had me followed and given you a fantastic story about accomplices and sabotage! Carmela! What kind of woman are you?"

"All woman!" she said furiously. "You offered me love and all the world, but you are just as bad as Carlos! Is it the business you are interested in—the casino and the hotel? Or is it me? He is all business, but you—you claimed to be different. You would make me happy! You want me all to yourself! And what do you do? I don't know what you do—I do not understand anything that is going on—but after

you leave me with all your promises the next thing I know is that you have lied, you have gone to visit the hotel site, and Carlos is enraged like some murderous beast!" Her eyes flashed again and she started pacing rapidly back and forth across the thick carpet of his elegant living room. "Is it that you want to make use of me-too? Are you going to be another Carlos? Because if that is so you might as well get out of my life right now. Don't play with me—Lord Simon Straven. I want love, not another business deal. Carlos hit me tonight because of you. Not because we made love together but because you *spied*. He would have killed me if it—if it had been more convenient for him."

Her face was flushed and there was a surprising dampness in the glittering green eyes. Nick felt a sudden rush of pity for this dazzling, vital woman. She was half-acting, he was sure; but only half. Love, not another business deal. . . . Probably she wanted both, but at least she did want love. He had none to offer her. Yet he did need what she could offer him. Of one thing he was sure—she genuinely did not know what was at the "hotel" site. He could be wrong. But he would take that chance.

"If you're finished, Carmela," he said gently, "listen to me for a moment. It is quite true that I had meetings in Santiago." It was, too. "It is also true that I was extremely interested in your hotel site from the moment you mentioned it. But only because I thought the secrecy surrounding it was so very curious and I was afraid—for your sake—that something very wrong was going on behind your back." Carmela said something that sounded like "Pah" and turned a look of scorn upon him. "So I had someone look at the site," he went on carefully. "Not to sabotage it or anything as melodramatic as that—just look at it and see what kind of hotel your Carlos is building for you." Suddenly his voice rose and lashed out at her like a whip. "I hope you don't really know what he's building you, Carmela! I know now, and I should hate to think that *you* know! Because if you do, there is no future for us together and no future for you at all." Her scornful look turned to one of puzzlement and fear. She took a couple of steps away from him and opened her mouth to speak. "I should particularly hate to think," Nick went on relentlessly, "that you loathed the western world, including England—which I had hoped you'd make your home—so much that you would want to destroy it

with the help of Chinese Communists. I know you Cubans will take any kind of help from anywhere, but that, I think, is going a little too far." He dug into his pocket and pulled out his first cigarette of the day. He felt he needed it, since he hadn't yet been able to pour himself that drink.

Carmela gasped. Her great green eyes widened and she said: "What are you talking about? I don't know what you mean!"

And she didn't. He could read it in her face.

Nick lit his Players. "Are you sure, Carmela? Then I'll tell you. It's a rocket installation. A missile base. Being built on Cuban soil by Chinese Reds without the knowledge of your government." He was not by any means sure of this last point, but he was beginning to get some inkling of why Ortega had used her. The Russians had had no need for a Carmela when they planted their first bases for the simple reason that they were hand in glove with Cuban officialdom. . . . Officialdom. That was another thought. Somewhere in this tangle there had to be some kind of government official. Paid by someone other than Fidel. Or why Carmela? "It's almost ready for use," he added, watching surprise and disbelief jolt through her like a current.

"No! That's not true! That's not possible!" she blurted. "You must be crazy. The casino is a casino and the hotel is a—"

"Missile base," he said firmly. "Ask Carlos to let you see it for yourself. If he won't, of course you must realize how he is using you. You will be what the Americans call the 'goat.' And you will be helping to wipe out half the world. Half the world, Carmela, or maybe even more than that!" He stared into her eyes as she shrank back. "Of course it may not matter then who is to blame. But it matters to me, now."

"I didn't know, I didn't know," she whispered. "I swear that I knew nothing. Please God, you must believe me, Simon." She was crumpling like a beautiful flamboyant flower dying in a drought.

"I do believe you, Carmela," he said gently, and drew her comfortingly into his arms. "Forgive me for hurting you—and letting Carlos hurt you. But it's because I love you so and want to get you out of this." Heel, he told himself; and kissed her.

"What are we going to do?" she murmured, when their lips had parted company.

"Worry tomorrow," he murmured back. "Right now, together think of only one thing I want to do. . . ."

He fumbled at the front of her dress. She smiled at him, of the anger and fear dissolved as suddenly as they had come, and whispered: "You can do better than that, my Simon."

He did very much better than that a few minutes later in the bedroom. Her hot tongue probed into his ears and her sharp teeth nibbled the lobes while he sought the hidden recesses of her body and caressed them urgently. For some reason he wanted to give her all he had, as if it were a consolation for what Carlos had done to her and what was still to come. And the Yoga that gave him strength and stamina and breath control gave him, as well, a skill in lovemaking that had reduced icebergs of women into warm rivers of passion. The one he was with now had never been an iceberg.

Carmela blazed. She whimpered with excitement and her fingers drew eagerly at his body while she moved beneath him.

He continued, with minor variations that made her gasp ecstatically and press herself against the warmth of him as though possessed by demons of desire. The more he gave, the more she wanted; and the more she wanted, the greater his prowess and the more subtly expert his technique. Skillfully, he drew her on until she was almost mindless with not-quite consummated lust, and held her tottering on the brink of rapture for moment after long, delicious moment. She lay back limply, her body soft and quivering under his caressing touch; then she was taut, limbs clutching his galvanically while she whispered in his ear; then again there was a tiny respite while she relaxed and seemed to expand in breast and thigh so as to have even more of herself to press against him; then she was moving her hips like a belly dancer seconds before the climax of her dance.

Nick performed wonders of sexual agility. Whatever she wanted he gave her, varying his pace so that she would wring every last ounce of exquisite pleasure out of the movements of his body. In return, what she was doing to him with her legs and breasts and hands and thighs and probing tongue was enough to tax him to the limits of his self-control. He felt his heart beginning to pound demandingly and his muscles became taut to bursting point. Her willing

with thrust, demanding, generously giving—welcomed him will + agerly.

is Outside in the night, a short figure with a cane clutched between its teeth was performing equally miraculous if somewhat different feats.

It was taking El Cano a little longer than he had hoped because someone in the two-room suite next door to Straven's was staring out of the open window at the city lights. Fortunately El Cano, moving as slowly and cautiously as a human fly must, had seen the man approach the window or else he would have been seen himself. He clung, now, to the face of the building, each foot on separate windowsills and his fingers clutching two parallel brick frames; and waited patiently. So far he had been lucky. The hotel was not full and he had quite easily forced his way into an empty room on Straven's floor, crawled outside, and edged along the brick face past empty rooms, curtained rooms, and rooms whose occupants were engaged in pursuits which kept their attention turned away from windows.

Except for this one. This one was slowing him down.

Ah! Now he had turned abruptly and gone out of sight. El Cano peered into the room. Good. The man had flung himself into a chair and had picked up a newspaper.

Carefully, El Cano sidled past the window and across the brick face to the next one. Straven's living room. The curtains were closed but the window was slightly open. Light glowed softly through the thick fabric, but there were no voices in the room.

The human fly cursed softly. They had gone out while he was making his tortuous way to Straven's suite. No, wait! There were other rooms, of course. And since they were not in this one, it was as well to enter here.

With tremendous care and skill he eased the window open wide enough to let himself step lightly over the sill.

Aha! No, they had not gone out.

El Cano, the man with the cane, glided softly across the hick carpet in a quick and soundless survey of the suite. It was as well to see what he could see while the looking was good—to make sure that if he had to run for the front door he would not dart mistakenly into a closet.

In the darkened bedroom Carmela cried out in a frenzy of passion. Two bodies jerked spasmodically and two minds went deliriously blank. And then there was a quivering and a

silence. Moments passed. They started murmuring together sleepily. Neither of them heard the very quiet click of the front door as it was unlocked in preparation for retreat or the silent pad of footsteps on the carpet.

"You must come away with me, Carmela," Nick said softly. "But you have to tell me how Carlos got you involved with this business of the site—even the casino, because you must see that he is using that as cover—before I can help you. What exactly has he made you do? And how did it all start?"

She sighed deeply, still warm and languid from the love-making. When she started talking he knew at once that she was hedging, tidying up the story and covering her past. He knew enough of her to skim away the surface gloss and see the truth. As she talked on, still fanning him with her long fingers, he formed a vivid mental picture of a woman who refused to call herself a prostitute but had been ~~used~~ that—until Castro had shrunk Cuba into a tight ball ~~and~~ bypassed by the rich American visitors who had ~~made~~ her so attractive. There were lean years, he ~~remembered~~ and Ortega came from Spain with his good ~~looks~~ and his flair for business. Carlos and ~~Ortega~~ each other attractive. He had promised her ~~to~~ and would help him with certain business ~~endeavors~~ to ~~the~~ creet about it.

Carmela sighed again and ~~looked~~ at him. She could not possibly ~~know~~ the bedroom door as she talked ~~to~~ for Carlos. For once, Nick's ~~sense~~ listened to Carmela and ~~answered~~ kisses and caresses.

"Being a foreigner, you ~~see~~ the ~~way~~ large funds into the country. ~~The~~ found it was impossible to ~~get~~ gambling house or hotel ~~over~~ money in. But he had ~~then~~ with a man in the Cuban ~~government~~ lightly in his arms ~~to~~ promises." Her voice ~~was~~ muggle the money ~~but~~ and turn it over to ~~the~~ casino and also for the hotel. ~~The~~ partners in everything he did.

where, somehow. But I can't *believe* that he knows, any more than I do, what you say is true about the mountain site."

"But the building license," Nick said. "For the casino too, but especially for the hotel. How did you get that, with no questions asked? This man in the government—he must have wanted to inspect the site."

She shook her head in the darkness. "No. He did not really care. That was part of what I had to do. It was for me to get the licenses from him. In exchange for money. A lot of money. What you call a bribe. And also. . . . Well. Carlos made the contact, you see. But it was important to both of them that there should be no connection known between them. So I . . . made the arrangements with the man and . . . gave him the money."

"And something else, too, didn't you, Carmela?" Nick said gently. "Didn't you have to give him something else? Tell me what Carlos made you do."

Her body tensed beside him and she turned her head away. "Don't ask me. He was awful. I had to go to his house and . . . he made me do things to him that I have never done before. And he did things. . . ." She shivered suddenly. "Don't make me tell you, Simon. Carlos made me go to him and do whatever he wanted. But you must not . . . stop loving me because of that. It was only because . . . I did not know what future I would have unless I did those things. Carlos was my . . . only . . . hope."

Nick cradled her in his arms and soothed her with low murmurs.

The man outside the half-open bedroom door listened with a fascination and excitement he had not known since the last time he had stalked his victim and caught him unawares. But this was even better! Slowly, quietly he released the mechanism on his cane so that it became a deadly sword. That devil's bitch who disliked him so! Babbling secrets in bed to the Englishman he had come to kill. He peered in cautiously and withdrew his head at once. They were close together—he had seen them dimly in the darkness—but not quite close enough. To catch them when they were joined in love play and intense with lust—that would be perfection. And they were still talking. It was as well for him to listen for a while.

He waited, listening with one ear and thinking how de-

liciously exciting it would be to pierce their entwined bodies through at once and pin them to the mattress in the very act of love. Oretega would enjoy hearing about it—the whore had served her purpose anyway.

And he himself would so much enjoy doing it.

A little fleck of foam appeared in the corner of his mouth.

The bedsprings groaned softly.

"I would like to meet that man," Nick said vengefully.

"Some day—oh, don't worry, I won't do anything until all this is over and you're safe—but some day he's going to suffer for what he did to you. Who is he? Where will I find the bastard?"

"Julio Machado," she said wearily. "He is sort of an aide to Castro. Not a very important one, but he was important enough for what Carlos wanted. I had to see him at his house. In his—his bedroom. It is a hideous place!" Carmela shuddered again. "All mirrors and weird pictures."

"The swine," Nick breathed. "Where does he live?"

She gave him the address and he filed it carefully in his mind. But there was still something missing.

"How can Carlos be so sure," he said, "that this man Machado wouldn't just take the money and then give away the whole story?"

Carmela made a little sound that was almost a laugh. "Because Machado expects to get more payments when the hotel is finished. And there is something else. Carlos had me hide an envelope in his room. I do not know exactly what is in it, only that it is some sort of document that will cause him great trouble if it is found. And of course if Machado starts making difficulties, Carlos will make sure that the envelope is found."

Hmm. That was not a bad idea. Maybe one that Nick himself could use in connection with Document XA.

"You hid it? Where?"

"Behind a picture in his bedroom. Right above his bed. I taped it to the back. I knew he would not look there for any reason because his miserable place is deep in dust and the picture had not been moved for months, maybe even years. Of course he has no wife to keep him clean, the pig, or I should have had to meet him in his office. He won't find it. Not even Carlos knows exactly where I put it. The idea was that he would send an anonymous letter, you know what I mean?"

"I know exactly what you mean," said Nick. "And where is Carlos now? Won't he wonder where you are?"

"He went to the mountain site. After he got some news that made him very angry. About the sabotage. That is when he hit me." She stirred within Nick's arms. "Simon, you must be wrong about him. I can believe many things—he is cruel, he is a liar, he is crooked—but not that he's a madman. Not a killer. Oh, but please don't let us talk about it any more. Love me, love me—love me once more before I leave you tonight. I must go back to the casino. But darling . . . love me first."

She kissed him hungrily and he responded with his entire body. Like naked savages they came together quickly, senses swirling in a race that could have only one ecstatic end.

El Cano gave a little involuntary sigh of anticipation. He stepped quietly into the room and padded to the bed, his cane-sword raised high to swing down in one lightning-swift death-dealing lunge. Now—now—he told himself, almost giggling with glee. One second more for them, and then they die—skewered together like raw shish-kebab!

The sigh! Nick heard it, and his heart turned over. Instinct screamed a message to him—roll! Without warning to Carmela, without loosening his clutch on her clinging body, he rolled over on the bed and slammed them both onto the floor beside it as if they were a couple of logs plunging over a cataract. He heard the thunk of something hitting the mattress even through Carmela's scream of outrage and surprise, and as he leaped to his feet leaving her lying crumpled there like an abandoned sack, he saw the dim shape of a short man withdrawing a long blade from the bed.

Swiftly, before the blade had left its mattress socket, Nick jumped onto the bed and bounced high into the air with one foot outstretched in a slamming sidekick. There was a split second for him to pray for his exposed anatomy as the blade came up and his foot went down, and then he felt flesh and bone go down beneath his heel. The long knife blade swished wildly through the air and he jumped away from it, using the bed as a trampoline. Carmela sobbed and whimpered on the floor behind him.

The cane-sword clattered softly to the carpeted floor. Nick jumped down after it, hard onto a short figure that flailed about on the floor and gave a gasping whoof! of sound as he landed on it. The figure doubled up and writhed be-

neath him with the desperation of a cornered tiger, its fingers clawing for the fallen blade.

It was dark down there on the floor, too dark for either man to see clearly what he was groping at. Nick felt a small, hard body beneath his knees and a thin neck between his hands. He felt the desperate rolling movement of the body and heard something clatter. He sensed rather than saw the man searching for the blade as he increased his grip around the neck, and then what happened was so sudden and so obscured by darkness that he never really knew just how it had occurred.

The small man twitched suddenly and made a convulsive movement with his arm. Nick felt something long and smooth brush against his thigh and jerked away from it involuntarily before he realized it was a handle, not a blade. His movement brought the other man to a half-sitting position, neck still clutched between Nick's straining fingers and upper body bending forward.

There was a nasty little thud as something met brief resistance and conquered it. The man beneath Nick gave a dreadful cry and jerked spasmodically—kicked out his legs—gargled hideously. And sank back like a lead weight in Nick's hands. Nick let the body drop. It lay still and quiet on the floor.

Carmela cried out in terror. Nick brushed his hand over the body, found out more or less what had happened, and let Carmela whimper while he found Wilhelmina where he'd left her with his pants. He pulled on his pants and padded out of the bedroom to glide silently about the huge suite, eyes and Wilhelmina alert for whatever else may be lurking there. He found nothing but the unlocked door and the wide-open window.

Nick secured them both and went back to the bedroom, flicking on the light switch as he entered.

Carmela was still crouched on the floor on the far side of the bed. A small, wiry man lay horribly contorted near the door. He looked very strange, and very dead, with the long cane handle protruding from his stomach.

A BOX OF CIGARS AND A TRUNKFUL OF BODY

It was hell's own nuisance.

On the one hand there was a sobbing, terrified woman; on the other, another body to contend with.

But Carmela, at least, recovered quickly, with the help of a jolting shot of rum and a few minutes of hard talking.

And when she did pull herself together she had a hard glint in her eyes that was at once encouraging and disturbing.

"El Cano," she said quietly. "Carlos' man. Although I often see him talking to Armando. And it was Armando who told me you'd come back." Her dark eyebrows drew into a thoughtful line. "I suppose that means that Armando is as deep in this as Carlos—of course! It was Armando who told Carlos about you in the first place. And I thought he was a hired hand. Oh, yes, oh, yes! . . . *Carlos* found him for me. Recommended him. Ha!" She laughed shortly. "Now I know why. To keep an eye on me. Make sure I stayed in line. My God—he fooled me, didn't he?" Self-disgust—and hatred—suffused her lovely face.

"Are you sure now about Carlos, Carmela?" Nick asked quietly. "Do you believe me that he's a killer, capable of anything?"

"Yes," she whispered. But it was not a gentle whisper. It was a hiss of hate. "I believe you. Oh, you are right—he has been using me. When he comes back I'll ask him to take me to the site. As God is my judge I will kill him if—"

"No! If you see him again he's liable to kill you first. I suggest you don't go anywhere near Carlos but hide out somewhere for a day or two until I can get you out of here. No, Carmela, don't fight me. Do as I say and stay under cover. You don't understand how deeply he's got you into this. He only has two choices. One, get rid of you at once. Two, keep you around as long as it suits him and then denounce you to the government—if there's any government

left by the time this thing is over. And if there is, you'll find out what it's like to face a firing squad. Listen to me." Nick took her by the shoulders and shook her roughly. There was a look of such implacable hatred in her eyes that he was afraid for her . . . and for the success of what he had to do. "Don't go back to the casino. Don't let Carlos find you. Take a room—stay here with me, anything you like—but don't see Carlos again. You've got to come away with me! Unless you've changed your mind, and you don't want to come."

"Oh, I want to, Simon, I do want to." She put her hands on his outstretched arms and looked into his eyes. "And I will. But what you don't understand is that I owe him something. I owe him a return for everything he's done to me. I'm going to see him again. Just once. I've got to have revenge—my own kind of revenge. I won't tell him what I know. He doesn't even have to know we've talked to each other tonight. How can he know? El Cano's dead. I'll go back to the casino. And I'll wait for him. Play along with him. Pretend to love him. And perhaps find something else that we can use against him. I hate him, Simon. Let me hate him! Let me hurt him!" Her fingers dug deep into his flesh. "I'll do anything else you say, but let me see him just once more!"

Nick nodded slowly. But he was thinking rapidly. He still had no absolute proof that Ortega was behind this thing, and there was a chance that she could get it for him. "Maybe. Maybe," he said slowly. "But I want you to keep in close touch with me and let me know how things are going. Call me. Keep calling me so that I know exactly what is going on. And in the meantime I'll find a way to get at him and get us out of here together. We'll have to make some plans. But for the love of God, Carmela, be as careful as you've ever been. I don't want anything to happen to you."

"It won't," she said, and brushed her lips against his hand. "But it will if I don't leave here now and show myself at the casino. I'll phone you every—Oh!" She pulled away from him and shot a look across the bed. "What will you do about—?"

"El Cano? Don't worry. I'll get rid of him somehow. Carmela . . . don't ever forget. I want you—safe with me." It was a lie, but he thought it time for a reminder of what

Lord Straven had to offer in case she thought of succumbing once again to Ortega's charms. "I want you to have everything I've got. Share it with me. My home, my heart, my love . . . everything is yours." He cupped her chin between his hands and kissed her lingeringly. "Love me?" he whispered. "I do, I do," she murmured back.

She left him moments later.

He lay back on the living room couch and immersed himself in thought. That she was genuine in her desire for revenge he had no doubt. What he really ought to do, he thought, was get the hell out of here as soon as possible and let the bodies lie where they may. But there were loose ends to consider. Alison. The Cane. Straven and Hansbury's reputation. The papers planted in Machado's house. The roll of film. The radio. What to do with all the bits and pieces. . . .

The hell with it.

Suddenly he was very tired. Right now he could use some sleep. The Cane could stiffen where he lay. Early in the morning Nick would contact London and clear his way out of this ugly tangle.

He padded back into the bedroom and ripped a blanket off the bed. His last thought before drifting off to sleep on the couch was of Carmela. He hoped that she could really handle Carlos as she thought she could. She was so sure that her story would hold up—that she had come in anger to see Lord Straven and demand the truth about his snooping, and had waited in vain for his return. Something must have happened to delay him, she would say with carefully calculated innocence. She was positive she could convince Carlos that she was on his side.

But she was wrong.

"Of course I can do it," said Alison, munching on her buttered toast. "I told you I could open anything. Doors, windows, safes, suitcases, cash-boxes, piggy banks, the lot. No problem. Just give me that address and I'll be on my way. Do you suppose he might be rich, this man?"

Nick looked at her reproachfully. "He may be, but that is not the point. All I want is that envelope behind the picture. With its contents, of course. And if you get a chance, take a look around. Maybe there's a desk or safe with something interesting in it."

"Maybe there is," she agreed, a faraway look in her eyes.

"Now look, Alison, if you've got the slightest doubt about this I don't want you to do it. I don't want you taking any needless chances. If you do nothing else but scout the place, get an idea of the layout and who comes and goes, you'll be helping me tremendously. I'd do it myself except I've got a kind of busy morning ahead of me and it's most important that I get my hands on that envelope as soon as possible. So if you can just case—"

"Case nothing," she said firmly. "Stop back-peddalling. I know exactly what you want me to do and I'm going to do just that. Anyway, I only case the joints I get to crack myself. Please pass the toast. Thank you. If you're in a hurry for the document I'd better finish my breakfast and get going. Where will you be when I'm through?"

"My room, I hope. I'll be in and out but I'm going to try to be there every hour on the hour so that I can be reached if necessary."

"And not only by me," Alison said penetratingly. "The overripe Carmela will be calling, I suppose."

"I hope so. No, there's no need to look at me like that. I can't get hold of her to check up on her so she has to do the calling. And I'm very much afraid she's stuck her neck into a noose. She's not so overripe that she deserves to die."

Alison looked at him thoughtfully. "No, I guess she isn't. So she did turn out to be your 'Star,' hmm? And this paper is tied in with her?"

"Ummm . . . you're close on both, but you're not quite right. In case you happen to get very careless—which I certainly hope you won't—you might have a little story ready that avoids all mention of Stars and documents and things like that. I wouldn't want to throw you to the wolves, but—more coffee? No, I'll pour it—but if you get yourself caught I won't be able to bail you out." He scanned her face, looking for a sign of doubt or misgiving. But her face was calm and her eyes were as clear and peaceful as a day in spring.

"Of course—that's understood," she said. "And I won't get caught. But I'll have a story ready anyway. I could even tell them that I'm Alison O'Reilly, well-known jewel thief." She flashed him an impish but deliciously dimpled smile that almost took his breath away.

"Look, don't kid about it," he said. "It's not just my plans I'm thinking of—it's your skin, too."

She patted his hand across the table. "I know that. But this is my kind of caper. I know what to do."

When the coffeepot was empty they parted company, Alison to "pick up one or two small tools" and Nick to send El Cano on his way. Alison left a few minutes ahead of him. He watched her cross the street outside the small café and head back for the hotel. Guilt stirred inside him. She was so young, so very much alive; so beautiful, and such an honest thief. If anything happened to her he would be haunted until the day he died. But she had wanted to help. "Sure, I haven't got anything better to do," she had said. "Good chance to keep my hand in." And she had listened with growing eagerness as he had told her what he wanted her to do.

He hoped devoutly that Julio Machado had not decided to take a day off at home.

When she was out of sight he paid the check and sauntered slowly after her, his mind clicking over like a computer and counting off all the myriad things he had to do.

Carmela, so far, was all right. She had called him, sounding sleepy but quite cheerful, from her downstairs office at the Club. Her own phone was a direct line between herself and Carlos, so she had to make the contact calls herself between her regular business conversations. If she was absent from her desk someone else was liable to scoop up the telephone, thus their arrangement that she should call him at hourly or at least two-hourly intervals. There was no word as yet, she said, from Carlos, but Armando was wandering around biting his fingernails and snapping at the help. Somehow he was going to have to get her into hiding to "wait for him," until everything blew over, or even take her out with him. What he was going to say to her when he got her to London, God himself probably didn't have a clue, but there were more immediate things to think about right now.

There was El Cano, waiting in the hall closet where Nick had bundled him early in the morning. He was stiff and awkward to handle, but the Carter luck was holding up—rigor was already relaxing its hold upon the body by the time he left it and making things a little easier for him.

Then there was the cigar box with its bottom layer of false stogies waiting to be filled and sent post-haste to England.

He let himself into his rooms and checked the closet door. Still firmly locked, as he had left it, and the bed un-

touched by the lackadaisical maid. That was one good thing about a poorly staffed hotel—it gave the guests so much more freedom for what they felt they had to do. And he felt very strongly that El Cano must be gotten out of here.

Nick changed quickly into the least elegant of his three suits and pulled the Lastotex mask down over his face. The next couple of hours were going to be very tricky. He drew on the skin-tight, flesh colored gloves devised by AXE's Editing Department, and cautiously left his suite and the hotel.

The man who appeared at the freight company warehouse and made arrangements for the shipment of a trunk bore no resemblance to Straven or Carter, though he may have looked vaguely familiar to certain blobs of moving camouflage up there on the mountain.

When he had inquired about the express rates to Santiago and guaranteed to deliver the trunk himself within the next hour or two he went to Eureka Rent-A-Car and picked out a battered country style station wagon of the type often used for hauling large but less than truck-sized loads. At his next stop he bought a trunk, secondhand but very sturdy and in good repair. Back in the car he took off his jacket, rolled up his sleeves, and drove around to the delivery entrance of the hotel.

There were a couple of other vans there unloading house-keeping supplies. The back door porter glanced at him as he shouldered the trunk and headed for the freight elevator. "Delivery and pickup for 908," Nick mumbled in Spanish. "I have to wait for it. You watch the wagon, will you?"

"Pah! Watch it? What's it going to do—stand on its head?" The porter laughed immoderately at his own humor and turned back to supervise the unloading of crates headed for the kitchen.

Nick rode up to the ninth floor and walked down the service stairway to his own room. He rapped on the door, still adorned with the Do Not Disturb sign he had tagged it with some hours before, and glanced around to see if anyone else had chosen that moment to pop out into the hall. The elevator door opened and a couple got out. He watched them walk away and let themselves into their room, then quickly unlocked his own, dumped the trunk inside, and locked himself in to do his grisly work.

The Cano was halfway into the trunk when there was a

rapping on the door. Nick froze. Waited for a moment in dead silence.

A key rattled in the lock.

"Who is it?" he called urgently.

"Maid!"

"Later!" he said impatiently. "Don't you see the sign?" For Chrissake! Of all mornings, she had to come earlier than her usual time. Unless, of course, she wasn't a maid at all.

"Señor! I have many rooms to do!"

"Then do another one. I'll be out of here in half an hour."

A female, if not particularly feminine, voice muttered something very unladylike and faded out. Nick waited for another minute and went rapidly to work. El Cano, blood-stained and ugly, slid reluctantly and clumsily into place. Nick thrust his cane in after him and snapped the lid shut.

The phone rang.

He cursed softly and secured the padlock, tempted to ignore the summons. No. Better not. He trotted into the living room and scooped up the receiver.

"Yes!"

"Simon?" It was Carmela's voice. "Everything seems to be all right. There is no word yet from Carlos, but he can't possibly be back here until late tonight. Armando seems to be very jumpy and suspicious, though. Half the time he is locked up in his office, talking on his telephone I think, and the rest of the time he is sticking his head in here and—three cases will be enough. I will phone back later if I find we need more." The phone clicked off.

Nick frowned to himself as he hung up. Armando snooping again, he supposed. And hoped the quick switch and end to the call meant nothing more sinister than that.

He went back to the gruesome trunk and hefted it experimentally. It was one helluva weight, but he would have to manage.

The hall was deserted.

Nick staggered out with his burden and locked the door behind him. It was considerably harder to get the trunk up the stairway than it had been to carry it down, but if he could avoid it he did not want it to be seen anywhere near his room.

His back was close to breaking when he dumped the thing into the elevator. A laundry man riding down with a cart-load of soiled linen gave him a sympathetic look.

"Heavy, hah?" he said. Nick grunted and managed a nod. He looked at the deep-bellied canvas cart and felt a twinge of envy. Now *there* was a way to haul a body around. Hmm. Wouldn't it be funny if the laundry man—? Yeah. Ha, ha.

The elevator car plunged down to the basement delivery area. Nick hoisted the trunk again and shuffled over to the station wagon. This time the back porter gave him a cursory glance and went on talking to a truck driver.

Nick bundled the thing laboriously into the back and drove away. A few blocks away from the hotel he stopped, put his jacket back on and spruced himself up a bit, and drove on to the trucking company warehouse.

After that it was easy. The company took his money and gave him a couple of labels to fill out. He addressed the trunk to Carlos Ramon Y'Ortega in care of a certain address in Santiago and gave the sender's name as Armando Maceo of the Casa Del Jaguar. Then he dropped off the station wagon at Eureka Rent-A-Car and went back to the hotel. His rooms had been made up and there was no one waiting for him with bomb or sword or strangling hands. But he knew that sooner or later someone was going to come looking for The Cane. And for Lord Simon Straven. If Alison came back with what he wanted there was no sense hanging around here waiting to be picked off by Carlos' band of killers . . . except that he had to be able to keep in contact with Carmela. Hmm. Carmela. It was time she called again. But of course it wasn't easy for her to call dead on the hour with all the club staff swarming around. "Dead" on the hour. Unfortunate phrase.

He changed back into Lord Straven's good suit, putting the Lastotex face mask into an inside pocket in case of need, and packed Lord Straven's bags with everything he did not plan to use in the immediate future. For the next few minutes he sat at the desk and drew carefully, and when he was finished he had a detail map showing the exact location of the mountain site and the roads that led to it. Then he huddled in the absolute darkness of the bedroom closet and removed the film from his camera. When he emerged from the closet he had two spools of film, each consisting of approximately half the shots he had taken. He opened up four of his phony cigars and inserted film into two of them and strips of the rubbery camouflage into the other two. A sample of each, in its cigar-like hiding place, went into his top pocket.

The others went back into the cigar box for shipment to The Straven and Hansbury Tobacco Company, attention Turner, London. The phone rang as he was folding his hand-drawn map into the fifth cigar.

Carmela, at last.

It was Alison.

"God, that's a spooky place," she said. "All mirrors and weird pictures. The man must be a nut." Alison's lovely, mobile face mirrored her distaste.

They were in her room. So were Nick's bags and every trace of Simon Straven. Straven was going to disappear from the hotel. In a day or two the Cuban Police were going to get a cable from London saying something like: LORD STRAVEN BACK FROM CUBA KNOWS NOTHING OF BOMB THREAT MUCH REGRET OUR ASSURANCES TO YOU REGARDING HIS IDENTITY BUT STRONGLY URGE YOU LOOK FOR AN IMPOSTOR. That should help to keep Straven and Hansbury's reputation clean. And the carefully worded document Nick held in his hand, plus the other items Alison had been thoughtful enough to bring along, were going to help Hawk build up a very interesting dossier of information to send to Fidel Castro.

"I guess he is," Nick said absently. "Poor sucker." The page he was scanning was—or purported to be—an agreement between Machado and a foreign power that did not name itself (a cunning, confusing move, but one that played right into Nick's hands) but promised Machado vast sums of money—to be delivered to him by go-between Carmela Estrella—and infinite power in exchange for his help in setting up a military base on Cuban soil. From that base the foreign power would mount a massive operation against Castro—and set up Machado in his place. Great! A little twist here, a little twist there, and AXE's Documents section could produce a document that would be damning to Ortega, Machado, and the Red Chinese. And maybe even to Castro, if Hawk wanted to play it that way. Wouldn't hurt to throw a real scare into Fidel . . . The anonymous letter (part of Document XA already being prepared) could strongly suggest that unless Castro took immediate steps to remove this excrescence on his soil planted there by his Chicom friends, both the United States and Russia would be thoroughly briefed regarding the Chinese-Cuban conspiracy. And that

Castro personally would be blamed for it by the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. Well, it was up to Hawk to handle it the way he wanted.

"You've done a great job, Alison," Nick murmured almost reverently, turning the other papers over in his hand. There were copies of the building licenses issued to Carmela Estrella for a casino and a hotel; a map showing the location of the site about seven miles away from where it actually was; and a small notebook in which amounts of cash were entered neatly against the dates. "So there *was* a safe."

"Mmm," she said, and eyed him thoughtfully. "I—uh—neglected to tell you that it was bulging with cash. The payoffs, I suppose. I—ah—have to say that the job was not entirely . . . without its compensations."

Nick's eyebrows shot up into his hair. "You didn't take it? That's part of our case against the fellow!"

She shook her head emphatically. "Oh, no, of course not. Well, only a very little. Cabfare, you might say. And . . . one other little thing." Alison held a clenched fist out toward him. "You brought my luck back, Simon. I know I did a good job. I couldn't resist a—tiny souvenir." She opened her closed hand and eyed Nick nervously.

In her hand she held one of the most fabulously beautiful sapphires Nick had ever seen. It blazed with a blue light that matched and enhanced her deep blue eyes, and it looked as though it lay in a hand that loved it for its exquisite beauty and would never let it go.

Nick gaped at it. "Alison, you—" And then he threw back his head and roared with the delighted laughter it seemed that only she could draw from him.

"You earned it," he said happily. "That, and a whole lot more!"

"Well, I didn't take much more," she said seriously. "I knew you—"

He drew her into his arms and kissed her with deep affection and whole-hearted gratitude.

It was a while before they talked again of weighty matters, but when they did the talk was very serious indeed. Nick made a speech. She shook her head. "I won't," she said. "I won't leave you behind." "But you have to," Nick insisted. "Sooner or later they're going to associate you with me and then you're going to be so deep in trouble you—" "I know that," she said calmly. "But you have to leave the country

anyway. And even if you take that bag Carmela along I'm going with you. We'll never see each other again if that's the way you want it, but until I know you're safe and finished with your job I will *not* leave you."

They argued long and strenuously, but she won. And in a way, Nick was very glad. It was not only that there was still one thing she could do for him; it was also that he could barely stand the thought of not seeing her again.

He told her how he planned to get away. "It may be tonight, it may be tomorrow. I can't promise how it's going to be. Wait there half an hour, no more, then leave. Until then we must not be seen together again. And if I don't make it by tomorrow night, go anyway." As he talked he folded her haul—except the cabfare and the sapphire—into the remainder of his hollow cigars. "Get rid of the bags whatever way you can—but please get rid of them. The camera and radio, particularly, must *not* be found."

She nodded. They talked some more. And kissed.

Nick left the hotel a little while later with an innocent-looking—and firmly sealed—cigar box tucked under his arm.

But the three men who followed him, one after the other, from the hotel lobby were not innocent-looking at all.

ENTER CARLOS, EXIT CARTER

Nick saw the first man. He could not know how many others were behind. But he sensed that it was long past time for playing games with underlings like El Cano and the Strangler. Ortega must be desperate to get rid of the elusive, snooping Simon Straven. And by now, he thought as he dodged hurriedly down the side streets leading to Vaquero's office, Carlos would have realized he must get Straven alive to question him about his motives and his "accomplices."

It seemed to him that he had shaken his tail by the time he reached the elegantly modern building housing the National Tobacco Enterprises. Señor Juan Vaquero greeted him in his

astefully furnished office suite with the same warmth and courtesy that had impressed Nick on their first meeting. And he was quite ready to fulfil his promise.

"But of course, Lord Straven!" he said happily. "I am so glad you have found our produce suited to your taste. Are you sure that three boxes will be sufficient?"

"For now," said Nick. "I want to try out my firm's reaction before sealing a wholesale deal, but I can almost guarantee you some very sizable orders within the next week or so after my colleagues have had a chance to try them out. And you are sure that you will not mind including this small box of individual samples in the shipment? I should like them sent for the sake of comparison."

"Very wise; very wise indeed." Vaquero nodded sagely, and with such sincerity that Nick was almost sorry he had to use him in this way. But he needed a second arrow to his bow, and this was it. "Naturally I shall send them. But we must pack them quickly. I have a man leaving for London this very afternoon and he shall take them with him—if that is agreeable to you."

It was most agreeable. Nick watched the shipment being packed and handed over to the courier. When he left the friendly Vaquero he knew he could have made a friend for life . . . if only his own life had been different and he were not a counterspy with the rank of Killmaster.

He found a public callbox downstairs and put a phone call through to Señorita Carmela Estrella at her business number. It was agreed that he should not call, but he had no intention of going back to his hotel room to receive calls from anybody and he had to talk to her. His job was done; he had to leave here, with her or without her. A male voice answered. Nick rearranged his voice and asked for her. She was busy; who was calling? He gave a name as phony as his voice and said he'd call back later.

Fair enough. She could be busy. But still he did not like it.

He walked briskly through the lobby of the building and let himself out through the great glass doors. One way or another he would have to get back into the Casa Del Jaguar and—Someone loomed up suddenly and stopped in front of him, a stiff and artificial grin plastered on his bland, high cheek-boned face. He thrust out a large and hamlike hand and said cordially: "Señor! How good to see you!" And the

big hand caught his and worked it like a pump handle. The grip was less a handshake than a crushing hold.

"I'm afraid I don't know you," Nick said coldly, wrenching his hand free and darting a look to either side of him. What he saw was far from reassuring. There were idlers on the street, watching curiously and half-fearfully, and others—two of them, who sprang up on either side of him—who were not idling at all. A car waited at the curb, motor running.

"Ah, but you will, Señor," said the man who had taken his hand. "You have heard of G-2, yes?" Two hard, unfriendly objects jabbed into Nick's ribs from either side. "We have something of interest to discuss with you. There is no need to be alarmed."

No need at all. Two guns jabbing into his sides, a ham-handed menace in front of him, a car waiting in the street. And all so wonderfully official looking that the people on the sidewalk hung back, half-frightened and half-fascinated. A run for it, a cry, and Killmaster was dead. No one would ever question the men who would have gunned him down.

"Good," said Nick. "Then let us discuss it here."

A third gun appeared in front of him.

"We will talk at headquarters." The voice had lost all pretence of friendliness. Three figures hemmed him in and propelled him toward the waiting car. He kicked out savagely, reflexively, and slammed a vicious elbow punch at the man who crowded his right side. He heard a grunt, a cry of excitement from someone on the sidewalk behind him, and then he heard no more. The pain was like a scream that drowned out all other sound. His head exploded into a thousand tiny fragments of agony and his belly churned excruciatingly from a low, almost mutilating, blow.

Darkness and the sense of movement were almost welcome when they came. Then there was nothing. Neither darkness, movement, hope, nor fear. Nothing but a deadly blank.

The world was like a carousel gone mad. He rocked and plunged, his stomach churning violently, and a rain-wet wind slapped harshly at his face. If he had not been tied to his soaring, tossing mount, he knew he would have been thrown down into the howling darkness underneath.

Tied to it. The thought stayed with him and he clung to it. His head was aching furiously and his gut felt as though it had been kicked by an angry mule. But there was no howling;

he had imagined that. He had not imagined the stinging wetness, the rocking, or the pain.

Dimly, he saw the man lash at his face with something that looked like a wet cloth, knotted; felt the chair that he was tied to dance up and down against a floor that gave off no sound as the chair legs pounded down on it; saw figures watching him and working on him and one that did not move.

"All right, Pepe—Manolo—that will do. He is joining us, I see."

The voice was distant, gentle, firm. The rocking and the lashing stopped. Nick opened his eyes wide and the room slowly stopped swirling. He saw a man standing beside him, ready to lash out again with the knotted wet towel; sensed the one behind him holding the chair-back; caught a sideways glimpse of someone guarding the door to the heavily curtained room. It was a strange room: sparsely furnished but thickly carpeted and lavishly curtained by heavy drapes that reached from floor to ceiling. Even the ceiling seemed to be covered with some sort of padding. Such furnishings as there were contrasted oddly with the luxurious draperies—a low wooden pallet, occupied; a solid wooden table; several straight-backed wooden chairs. Nick was tied to one of them. His legs were free but his arms were lashed to the back of the chair so tightly that their numbness seemed to seep into his body.

There were two people directly in front of him. One was Carmela, lying naked, hideously bruised and silent on the wooden pallet. The other was a medium-sized but compact and almost incredibly handsome man with glossy black hair, olive skin and deep, dark eyes, and the high cheekbones of Spanish aristocracy. The strong, flat-lipped mouth curved into a cruel smile as Nick stared dully at the man.

"Permit me to introduce myself," the man said graciously. A shapeless object dangled from his long and graceful fingers and he swung it back and forth with calculated casualness. It was the Lastotex mask of Nick's "accomplice." "My name is Carlos Ramon Y'Ortega. But like you, I wear a mask. Not on my face, for that has not been necessary, but a mask in every other way." The smile broadened. "For instance, I am also known—and more correctly—as Wong Yao-Shen. Possibly—possibly not—you will be interested to know that I was born only blocks away from here of a Spanish mother and a Chinese father. Not really an uncommon combination here in

Cuba. It is really only my education that is uncommon, because it was provided by—of course you have guessed!—certain citizens of Peking who, shall I say, adopted me and trained me carefully for the task I now perform. For the task I now so very gladly perform." The smile wiped off the face as if it had been chalk. "And now you will tell me who you are. Carmela, I regret to say, does not seem to know. I have asked, as you can see. Look at her, Straven. That is only the beginning of what will happen to you unless you tell me all about yourself, and very quickly."

"Carmela," Nick moaned painfully. "Carmela! Forgive me, please forgive me. He can't get away with this, believe me. . . ."

Carmela's green eyes fluttered open. The spark was gone; they were like empty caves. She looked at Nick and groaned. "Simon . . . Simon . . . love me. . . . Help. . . ." She groaned again. The once-vivid eyes closed and her head fell back.

"I do," Nick muttered. "We'll get out of here."

Carlos laughed harshly. "Very touching. And most interesting. Look around you. And when you've looked, be good enough to tell me how you propose to leave."

Nick looked. Looked at the man beside him, with the ferocious grin and the knotted towel. At the man behind him, holding a thing that looked like a bicycle chain with sharpened spikes. At the man waiting at the door, armed with a gun. At Carlos, now pointing at him a snub-nosed metal barrel equipped with a silencer. At the table next to Carlos, on which all Nick's prize possessions lay—the fake cigars and Wilhelmina; Hugo, his stiletto, and the two small pebble-shaped objects that he called Pepitos. It was hopeless, hopeless. . . .

Or was it, quite? A small spark of an idea came to him, and with it, a tiny gleam of hope.

"All right," he groaned. "You win. I can't leave. But that doesn't mean I have anything to talk about. I don't know what you want. Whatever I saw, I saw by accident. I don't know what it's all about. If you try to keep me here my company, my government, will—"

"Manolo!" The handsome face twisted into an animal mask. "A little persuasion, if you please!"

The sharp-spiked chain came down viciously against Nick's neck. Again, again, again. He stood it as long as he felt he should, gritting his teeth and grunting with the pain.

"Pepe!"

The knotted towel struck him in the face, hard as a massive fist and stinging as the tentacle of a giant octopus. First the chain, and then the towel; towel, chain, chain and towel. . . .

"Enough," he moaned. "Enough!" He closed his eyes and slumped back in the chair, thinking rapidly beneath his blanketing of a stabbing pain.

"Ah!" Carlos smiled genially. "Then you will talk, yes?" The spiked chain whirled behind Nick and struck him savagely behind the ear.

"Yes, yes!" Nick yelped. "But as my name is Igor Davinovsky—*Comrade!*—you will suffer for this!"

Carlos laughed. "I don't think so. And I will tell you why. Stop, Manolo! Both of you." The rain of blows ceased suddenly, leaving stinging pain and a blinding weariness. Nick stared at the man . . . and at the things lying on the table. "Davinovsky, is it?" Carlos said. "We will see. But even if you are one of our Soviet—ah—*Comrades*, I do not believe that I shall be the one to suffer. You see, my country has plans that do not include our Russian friends. I shall tell you just what we are planning here in Cuba, and then perhaps you will be good enough to tell me the truth about yourself . . . Igor. Igor!" Carlos chuckled. "Simon Straven, Igor Davinovsky! What will we be hearing next! No matter—we will find out soon."

"But why Carmela?" Nick said harshly. "Why did you have to hurt her? She knows nothing about me, nothing about you! Why did you beat her?"

Carlos shook his head regretfully. "It is a pity about her. But I truly thought she had betrayed me. It did look like it, you know. And our scheme was much too good to be given away by a worthless tramp. Let me tell you what it was, before you die—I should say, before you talk. Or perhaps we will let you live a while if you tell me what I want to know. . . . We shall see. In the meantime, listen to the beauty of the plan. You shall see that we Chinese are not the primitive fools you take us for." He settled himself on the edge of the table and swung his elegantly trousered legs.

"It is a scheme that my superiors in China have been working on since what is known as the Cuban crisis, when the Americans called Russia's bluff—if that is what it was—and demanded the removal of the missiles here. And Nikita Khrushchev—the blundering, cowardly fool—*did* re-

move the missiles!" Carlos' handsome face twisted with scorn. "But that gave us the idea. Suppose the Americans were to discover that Russia had not disposed of all the missile sites and missiles, but was actually building a new missile site and stocking it with rockets pointing directly at the U.S.? And better yet—" the man who called himself Ortega gave a wolfish grin, "—suppose that this Russian Cuban missile base actually launched a spread of rockets toward American soil? You can imagine the holocaust!" He laughed and rubbed his carefully manicured hands together. "The United States would launch return rockets against Cuba and perhaps against the Soviet Union as well. The Soviets, whether attacked or not, would immediately send their nuclear weapons to blast America. You understand the picture? It could happen—easily—but we Chinese are making sure it happens. The base, as of course you know, is ours. If by any mischance it is discovered, we Chinese are absolutely in the clear. I have covered my tracks well, as you can imagine. And you can also imagine how it will be when Cuba, the United States and Russia are all busy firing off nuclear weapons at each other!" Carlos laughed out loud. "Who will then take over the world? There is only one answer. We, the people who outnumber all the rest. We, who need land and have the power to get it. We, the people of Communist China! Is that not a pretty scheme?"

"Very pretty," Nick agreed dully.

"I thought that you would think so." Carlos swung himself lightly down from the table. "And now—it is your turn. Who sent you? Quickly! Tell me! And tell me what you found." There was no longer anything handsome about his face.

Carmela made a little twitching movement and sighed.

"Tired. . . ." Nick said. "Talk later. But . . . pictures. Other things. Open . . . false cigars. Little round balls. Open them. Just a twist, and then they're open. Don't be afraid. No tricks. One of your men . . . open them if you like." His chest heaved painfully. "Let me . . . rest a minute. Then . . . tell you . . . if you promise me . . . make a little deal with you, help us both. If you are afraid to open those things, untie me and I will do it!"

"Hah!" Carlos barked with mirthless laughter. "Untie you! Manolo, come here and open up these things."

The hulking Manolo detached himself from behind Nick's chair and shambled over to the table.

"The small balls first," said Carlos. "They are small. What could be small enough to go in them? Pepe! Manolo, you fool!"

Manolo twisted with his thick fingers. Nick's face changed rapidly. "Microdots," he said faintly. "Very small. But... my identification."

It was nonsense, but Carlos was intent on the matter. Nick took a deep, long breath and held it. His mouth was open.

"Nothing! Nothing!" Carlos said, looking at Nick from Manolo and shaking it as if expecting to see a cloud of microdots come fluttering out. Nick's face was as if he had passed out. But he kept his eyes open and saw the furious look that Carlos gave him. He grabbed one of the cigars and twisted it open. He looked at it with satisfaction as Carlos pulled out a spot of the tobacco. "Try the other ball!" Carlos tipped at the second ball. The thug fumbled at Pepe's number.

"These must be the smallest microdots in the world," Carlos said angrily. "But you have them in the ball. You with your mask! And then I caught you. He stopped suddenly and looked at Nick with a glazed look in his eyes. Then Pepe, with the knife, turned his head and looked at Nick. He turned gracefully down to the ground. He did not move.

Two powerful doors of the building were open. Nick moved forward. He bumped and fell. He was at Hugo, forcing him to the ground. He held the knife against the man's throat. He waited for a few minutes. . . . He moved forward and thrust the knife into the man's back. He leaped forward and found some blood. He had been told that the man was not powerful. He thought so. He looked at the man. He was dead.

Nick turned away from her. His heart felt as close to bursting as his lungs. He picked up Carlos' gun, with its stubby silencer, and shot the man between his eyes. Then he made his way to the door, past the other sleepers, and unlocked it quietly. It opened into a closet which opened into another room. He swung the inner door open and raised the silenced gun.

Armando was sitting at a desk talking to another man. The driver of the 'car, perhaps. It really didn't matter. Nick shot them both as they turned around. The last thing he bothered to look at was the frozen consternation on their faces.

He pulled the swarthy mask down over his face and walked out through the Casa Del Jaguar as though he owned it.

It was night and he still had miles to go. But there was time, and he knew that Alison would be waiting for him in the cove, ready to swim out with him to the waiting boat.

One day later a man in Santiago, still awaiting orders from his bosses in Havana, opened up a trunk and screamed with horror. Shortly afterwards the police rapped on his office door and gave him further cause to scream. They were interested in knowing, they said, just what connection he and his associates had with the Casa Del Jaguar in Havana. Some very strange things had been happening there of late. And what was in the trunk, Señor? The man who had opened the trunk containing a body and a cane found things awfully difficult to explain. . . .

Two days later Fidel Castro received an interesting communication, accompanied by documentary evidence of a revealing and alarming nature, from a mysterious source. Fidel was never quite sure where it came from, but there was something about the tone and style of it—subtly threatening and dripping with quiet menace—that made him think it must have come from a Soviet comrade who had reason to be much displeased with his Bearded Brother. . . .

Three days later Nicholas Carter, no longer Simon Straven to his friends, sat back in the second-best armchair of his suite in a Miami hotel, enjoying the last hours of his brief vacation and reading the local newspapers:

CASTRO AIDE EXECUTED!

Julio Machado shot for plotting secret coup with help

of Red Chinese! Wealthy Cigar Czar Carlos Ramon Y'Ortega accused post-mortem of engineering ill-fated Castro overthrow as agent of Chicoms. Military base reported found in Oriente Province near Castro's old mountain hideout said to be jumping-off point for insurrection planned by Machado, Ortega (alias Wong Yao-Shen) and Red Chinese Intelligence. . . .

Nick read on, fascinated, comparing the news stories with his own knowledge of what had really happened. The world would probably never know that Russian diplomatic headquarters in Havana had received a carefully edited version of the dossier that had been sent to Castro, and that the Russians had actually cooperated with their American counterparts to demand the swift dismantling of the base—or else. And that Julio Machado, that poor, greedy fool with the mirrors and queer pictures, had been nothing but a goat set up by the Chinese Reds and counted out by Carter. . . .

There was a crash and a loud wail of anguish from the tiny kitchenette. Nick grinned and tossed aside the papers. "Forget the coffee, honey!" he called out. "That isn't what I really wanted, anyway."

Alison appeared in the doorway wearing a delectably flimsy negligee and a distressful look. It was a captivating combination, both items of which could easily be removed.

"You didn't? What *did* you really want?"

Nick crooked his finger. "Come here, baby. Come here and I'll show you."

She went over to him and he showed her.

After all, he did have a few hours left of his vacation.

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